

# Children and Young People Scrutiny Advisory Board

## Task and Finish Group on A Strategy for Learning in Cumbria

(DRAFT FINAL REPORT)

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Copies of this report and documents referred to in it are available on request from the Scrutiny Unit

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## **INTRODUCTION**

At the meeting of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Advisory Board on 16 September 2009 members received a presentation and a report on "A Strategy For Learning In Cumbria". A number of new members of the Board had been voted onto the County Council at the June 2009 elections and therefore only had first sight of the Strategy at the meeting.

A number of concerns were raised which led the Board to establish a Task and Finish Group to investigate and seek reassurance from officers that the Strategy addressed the issues that the members had highlighted. They also wanted to seek clarification of the County Council's intentions in other areas of the document.

The Task and Finish Group consisted of Mrs C Feeney Johnson, Mrs L Hammond, Mrs T Macur (Chair of the Task and Finish Group) and Mrs C Salisbury.

The objective of the Task and Finish Group was to undertake a piece of pre scrutiny work which would inform policy and increase member input into the way the Strategy shapes the future of school organisation. This piece of scrutiny work has added value to the work of Cumbria County Council as it has enhanced member involvement and informed them to a greater extent about a Council policy.

It was recognised that this piece of Task and Finish Group work would be time limited (one meeting) given that the Strategy would be submitted to Cabinet for its consideration in December 2009.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A one off Task and Finish Group meeting was held with two officers involved in drafting the Strategy. Due to time constraints, members submitted their questions in advance to the officers so they could provide members with full answers and to ensure that all the evidence was gathered at one meeting.

At the Task and Finish Group meeting, the officers clarified a number of issues for members (as they had been able to liaise with colleagues before the meeting) and expanded on areas that members felt needed further explanation in the Strategy.

The Corporate Director – Children's Services will be submitting a document to Cabinet highlighting the suggested recommendations that have been made by members of the Task and Finish Group and it will be for Cabinet to decide whether the changes will be incorporated into the final strategy.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Recommendation 1**

*(Strategy for Learning - 1.3 The Context of Cumbria)*

The term Key Service Centre should be used to reflect the terminology in the Regional Spatial Strategy and the extended policies in the Cumbria and Lake District Joint Structure Plan 2001 – 2016.

### **Recommendation 2**

*(Strategy for Learning - 2.2 ICT provision)*

Include an explanation of technical terms.

Insert in the Strategy an explanation that ICT provision will be under regular review as ICT is constantly changing.

### **Recommendation 3**

(Strategy for Learning- 3.2 Models of Schooling: Learning/Community Cohesion)

Sentences 2 & 3 are similar; insert into the Strategy what the rationalisation process is to clarify what the County Council will do and where the school is no longer viable, what the County Council will do to rectify the situation

Best practice in Cumbria's schools should be highlighted (such as collaborations) and rolled out into other schools.

At 3.3, insert "and strategically resourced provision within schools"

### **Recommendation 4**

Refer to "the School Leader/Head Teacher" rather than just "Head Teacher".

### **Recommendation 5**

Officers should consider where to include issues such as truancy, family problems etc in the Strategy. This could be done by way of highlighting where schools are working in groups to address these issues. It needs to be emphasised that the County Council is already taking steps to resolve these issues

### **Recommendation 6**

Ensure Leadership courses are included in the Governor Training Programme

### **Recommendation 7**

Strengthen the reference in the Strategy that Head teachers/School Leaders may have to look after more than one school

### **Recommendation 8**

Insert into the Strategy that Inclusive Cumbria is being reviewed.

### **Recommendation 9**

Bring members' concerns about some schools' poor performance because of the high rate of Special Educational Needs children being integrated into mainstream schools and lack of resources to support them to the attention of the Head of Service Commissioning and Management Support

### **Recommendation 10**

With reference to all age schools, it needs to be made clear that it is not necessarily the route the County Council will be taking but may be considered if appropriate in particular geographical contexts.

### **Recommendation 11**

With reference to 16+ education, include in the Strategy that 16+ education will be reviewed and addressed by the County Council.

## **BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

The County Council has a vision for Cumbria in that it wants the best chances for every child, young person and their family to ensure that all children and young people will reach their full potential. Young people have an important part to play in Cumbria's future.

The Council has high aspirations for every child and young person in Cumbria and is committed to working with partners to achieve the best for all. The size of the County and wide variations between communities means that the Council is working together with families partners and communities to understand local needs and develop local and equitable solutions

Children's Services is undertaking a significant programme of school reorganisation and remodelling to address the fact that the number of children in the county is forecast to decline in the coming years.

The Strategy for Learning includes proposals and a vision for Cumbria to transform learning across all phases of schools and centres for learning and has been developed to support and underpin a comprehensive review of provision for learning in the county.

It is based on the concept of a fully integrated approach to the delivery of services that are fit for purpose and has a locality focus. This includes all agencies working together at a community level to develop proposals for delivering transformational learning within local areas and with local people and their representatives.

It identifies eight underlying principles which have been agreed by stakeholders in local communities and offers flexible and adaptable models for the delivery of learning which will meet children and young people's needs which are appropriate to the different geographical settings in the county.

The Strategy would enable better delivery of education and raise standards whilst enabling better delivery of the Every Child Matters outcomes. The Strategy sets out the vision for Cumbria, the starting point and includes the strategic principles , what the vision will deliver, what will happen in the transformation of buildings and how the strategy will be implemented.

## FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Members had drafted a list of questions/observations and issues relating to the Strategy and these were circulated to officers before the meeting.

### **Task and Finish Group Meeting 2 November 2009**

Officers responded in detail to the issues raised by the four members of the Group. These were as follows:

- 1. Members were concerned about the rationalisation of smaller schools within easy access to other provision; what was classed as “easy access to other provision”?**

#### *Officer comment*

A great deal of research had been undertaken in the County, including visits to small schools and liaising with head teachers and governors to ensure there was an overarching strategy which would not threaten small schools. Easy reach was defined as not having to travel too long to reach the school although it was recognised that in rural areas this could be a challenge.

There could be problems with the sustainability of schools if the school roll continued to decline. Although birth rates were increasing in urban areas there was still a reduction in primary school rolls. This was partly due to second home ownership in rural areas and local people being unable to afford local housing.

The strategy was not about closing schools, but about protecting and maintaining their financial viability. This would be done through schools working collaboratively, such as sharing staff, resources and activities so there could be continued provision.

- 2 Members thought that two sentences were contradictory; these related to geographically strategic schools, even though small, would be retained whilst very small schools in areas where there was easy access to other provision should be the focus of rationalisation. This needed to be clarified.**
- 3 16+ education was not mentioned in the Strategy. Members thought that it would be prudent to include that this issue was being reviewed and would be addressed by the County Council.**

Officer comment

This would be resolved as officers were undertaking extensive work in this area at present as it was high on the Council's agenda.

**4. What/where is the key delivery centre in the South Lakeland area?**

Officer comment

The Key Delivery centres in South Lakeland were those areas with the largest populations (Kendal, Kirkby Lonsdale). This term could be changed in the Strategy to "Key Service Centre" to reflect the terminology in the Regional Spatial Strategy and the extended policies in the Cumbria and Lake District Joint Structure Plan 2001 – 2016.

- 5 One member explained that schools in South Lakeland were not using MOODLE (a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)) to help with teaching and learning requirements, instead they were using a different VLE which they considered to be a better and more successful option. Members considered it to be a step backwards if schools would all be instructed to use the same technical tools, as was suggested in the Strategy.**

Officer comment

Should the County Council be successful in attracting Building Schools for the Future funding, schools would be required to sign up to a managed service to operate a VLE. Not all schools used the same provision but one VLE was wanted in Cumbria; officers wanted the correct solution.

- 6 Members thought that it was essential that it was inserted in the Strategy that the County Council was actively reviewing its ICT provision in schools as ICT was constantly changing and being updated**

Officer comment

Officers concurred with this.

- 7 There was concern that there was no mention of South Lakeland in the list of areas where secondary school rationalisation was taking place due to the number of surplus places.**

Officer comment

Specific localities/areas were not covered in the Strategy in detail. It was a strategic document and was a framework for future planning.

- 8 With reference to the Strategic Principles set out in Strategy, it was thought that Secondary schools could not afford for school leaders to have greater than a 0.5 teaching load**

Officer comment

The School Improvement Team had confirmed that it was against County Council advice to have over a 0.5 teaching load in the secondary sector and they were not aware of any examples of this.

- 9 Reference should be made to The School Leader/Head rather than Head teacher.**

Officer comment

Officers agreed with this suggestion.

- 10 Issues affecting quality of education (such as truancy, family problems) had not been addressed in the Strategy. If education was to improve and move forward, members thought that this should be included in the Strategy**

Officer comment

The Strategy was a broad Strategy and would not include detail of this kind but it would be taken on board. It could be highlighted that some schools were working together in groups to address such issues.

- 11 It was acknowledged that 36 secondary schools would see a reduction in the number of students on roll but also that birth rates in urban areas were increasing. It was hoped that officers had recognised that it would take a long time for the rise in birth rates to have an affect on the secondary school rolls.**

- 12 There was not a review of the effectiveness of Inclusive Cumbria in the Strategy - members asked why parents were not allowed an early choice of special school**

Officer comment

The Head of Service – Commissioning and Management Support who headed the Special Educational Needs (SEN) team had advised that it was

not appropriate to include this in an overarching strategy. Inclusive Cumbria would be reviewed in 2010. Six years had passed since it had been written and the review of the policy was currently being scoped.

There was a wide choice of schools available as soon as a child was statemented and many chose mainstream schools. Early integration was better so there was no stigma attached to children. With regard to early choice, a statement superseded admission criteria so SEN children should be able to access their choice of school. Members recognised that there was scope for the review of the statement procedures.

- 13 In relation to “hub and spoke” arrangements being developed for all schools, it was felt that “strategically resourced provision within schools” had been omitted from the Strategy and therefore should be included.**

Officer comment

Although not specifically referred to, this encompassed strategically resourced provision schools.

- 14 There was no mention of children being consulted in the Implementation part of the Strategy, why was this?**

Officer comment

This was not a formal consultation and children had not been consulted. Instead, there had been an evolving dialogue with a number of groups and their suggestions had been fed into the Strategy. The County Schools' Organisation Group which included representatives from a number of groups had received the document on a regular basis and had an input, it also had been shared through head teacher groups. The document was still evolving and changes were still being made to it.

- 15 Members asked whether primary school roll numbers were taking into account the increase in immigration?**

Officer comment

The projection for school numbers were based on historic figures but figures from the Health Authority and GPs were also taken into consideration so the figures should reflect the rise in immigration.

- 16 There was a concern that qualified teachers would be lost and schools would take on managers who did not have teaching**

**skills and teachers in charge of multiple schools would not have the time to engage with pupils on a personal basis.**

Officer comment

School governing bodies appointed school leaders. The School Improvement Team was investing a great deal of time on providing and facilitating leadership courses and these would be added onto the Governor Training Programme

- 17 The Strategy did not make reference to the new governance arrangements. It was possible that if more than one governing body looked after more than one school there could be divided loyalties.**

Officer comment

There was a wish to move away from “protectionism” of schools, this would be a long term challenge as there was a need to look at provision for the whole community not just individual areas. There was the possibility of having shadow governing bodies and sharing resources whilst still being separate. The County Council would look at a number of models to address these kind of issues

- 18 Some schools were not performing as well as they should because of the high rate of SEN children integrated into mainstream small schools (mainly due to a lack of resources such as psychologists and statements). Members thought that the SEN policy should be reviewed.**

Officer comment

The Council was aiming to cluster schools together to share resources although this would be flagged up with the officer who was responsible for SEN in the County Council.

- 19 There was no evidence that All Age Schools helped with the transition from primary to secondary schools. There were concerns about bullying of younger children from older children. There were however, examples of best practice in the South Lakeland area where secondary schools worked successfully with feeder schools. It should be included in the Strategy that best practice within the county should be acknowledged and rolled out to other schools.**

Officer comment

All age schools were not the solution for all areas of the county, although it might be worth considering on the Solway Plain and in the Millom area. It would not address the surplus places issue but there was success when schools worked collaboratively. This could include children attending schools that are on different sites – where a head teacher is responsible for all children on different sites, teachers are shared and regular visits are made to the sites.

**20 Would all new schools have sprinkler systems?**

Officer comment

Sprinkler systems would be recommended in new build schools but it would be prohibitively costly to retrospectively fit sprinklers in existing buildings.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the members of the Task and Finish Group welcomed the opportunity to input into the very important Strategy for Learning in Cumbria.

They feel that it is important to recognise that with such an important key Strategy, opportunities for 'pre scrutiny' should in future be incorporated into the strategic planning process. In future it is hoped that more time is given for members to help inform this process.