

REPORT TO: Children, Young People and Families Policy and Performance Board

DATE: 4th January 2016

REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director, People & Economy

PORTFOLIO: Children, Young People & Families

SUBJECT: Scrutiny Topic Report: How do we work with our families of schools?

WARD(S) Borough-wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 To inform members of the purpose, content and outcome of the scrutiny topic meetings and to present for consideration the recommendations emerging from the scrutiny process.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That:

- i) the report be noted; and**
- ii) the Board approves the report recommendations.**

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 A scrutiny topic group made up of 6 members was established in December 2014 to explore with officers: How are we working with our families of schools?'

3.2 Scrutiny group membership

Councillors:

- Cllr Mark Dennett (Chair)
- Cllr Pauline Hignett
- Cllr Kath Loftus
- Cllr Geoff Logan
- Cllr Angela McInerney
- Cllr Bill Woolfall

Officers:

- Ann McIntyre, Operational Director, Education, Inclusion and Provision
- Gill Bennett, Divisional Manager, Education

3.3 A total of 4 meetings were held between December 2014 and September 2015. Within the scope of the scrutiny, members considered the role of the Local Authority in all schools, including its relationship with academies. Officers asked whether members could consider whether there should be a differentiated approach between officer roles, service provision and charges for maintained schools and academies.

3.4 **Meeting 1 - December 2014**

3.4.1 The first meeting provided the opportunity for Members and officers to explore what was to be explored and to determine the scope of the scrutiny topic: How are we working with our families of schools?

3.4.2 Within the first meeting officers outlined the context of Halton's school provision outlining the designation of the Borough's 65 (non-independent) schools:

- 3 maintained nursery schools
- 4 special schools, including 1 converter academy
- 49 primary schools including 1 converter and 3 sponsored academies
- 8 secondary schools including the all through school, 2 faith schools, 2 converter academies, 2 sponsored academies and a free school.
- 1 Pupil Referral Unit (PRU).

3.4.3 Officers outlined the current model within which Local Authority officers are engaging with all schools, regardless of designation, as reflected in the allocation of link officers to all schools and their inclusion in the categorisation process. In addition to the allocation of school improvement link officers, academies, including the free school, access a number of statutory and non-statutory services provided by the Council, through the opportunity to purchase services.

3.4.4 Members were advised that it was essential that a relationship was maintained with all schools as the LA has range of statutory responsibilities which include special educational needs, children in care and safeguarding. In addition, a number of academies host LA Resource Provision.

3.4.5 It was agreed that it would be helpful if one of the outcomes of the scrutiny was to provide a steer for officers around how we differentiate our approach with maintained schools and academies. This would include consideration of any meetings and communications that academies are currently exempt from.

3.5 Meeting 2 - January 2015

- 3.5.1 In the second meeting officers shared an example of the difference between the Local Authority's approach to maintained schools and academies as outlined in the Department's statutory guidance for Local Authorities regarding their powers of intervention with schools causing concern (SCC).
- 3.5.2 Where there is a concern around the performance of an academy, the school's link officer will discuss this with the school. However, where concerns remain the role of the Local Authority is to share concerns with the Regional School Commissioner, who reports directly to the Secretary of State.
- 3.5.3 It was acknowledged that the more closely officers work in a 'family' approach with all schools the better able we are to share and influence best practice across the Borough. An example of this was linked to discussion around schools' curriculum offer.
- 3.5.6 The well-established 11 - 19 partnership was cited as an example of where schools and officers are working together. Where there are changes, including curriculum, post 16 provision, it has proved most effective to respond as a family of schools, sharing and debating information as a collaborative including around nationally raised priorities including curriculum, assessment and the Prevent agenda.
- 3.5.7 Whilst the Local Authority has a role in continuing to influence best practice, as 'champions of excellence', it was recognised that schools are autonomous bodies, working under the direction of their governing bodies or trust boards (academies). This is exemplified in a number of documents that outline the distinct LA roles and responsibilities for maintained schools and academies. Members explored with officers if, set against this framework, we can have a true family of schools working together?
- 3.5.8 The Local Authority retains its responsibility for Safeguarding in Halton within all schools and settings.

3.6 Meeting 3 - June 2015

- 3.6.1 The scrutiny provided the opportunity to consider models within other Local Authorities including the Hartlepool Model. Those present explored some of the similarities between the Halton and Hartlepool models. Broadly similar systems were identified as common to both Local Authorities including the underlying commitment and work with all schools.
- 3.6.2 Members recognise that schools are autonomous bodies, working under the strategic direction of their governing bodies or trust boards

(academies). However, Members are keen to promote and support the continuation of opportunities to influence practice in all schools including good practice around curriculum offer and assessment. The 11 - 19 partnership was cited as an example of where all secondary schools, the College and officers are working together. There have been successes as a result of partnership working for example all schools agreeing the In-Year Fair Access protocols. Where there are changes, including around the curriculum and post 16 provision, it has been very effective to respond collaboratively as a 'family' including around national issues.

3.6.3 Strong partnership working has been formally developed over the past 2 years through the implementation of Halton's Strategic System Leadership Group. Members of this partnership group, established by the LA with its Teaching schools, includes system leaders across maintained schools and academies. Terms of reference are established outlining the remit of the group. All schools are encouraged to work with the Teaching Schools and their alliance members to access the wide range of professional development that they deliver and facilitate.

3.6.4 Halton has effectively established its system leadership approach, including school to school support and sector led improvement, acknowledged by Senior Regional HMI in the annual North West Ofsted report. The Local Authority fulfils its strategic school improvement role in partnership with its Teaching Schools and their Alliances, both of which are academies.

3.7 **Meeting 4 - September 2015**

3.7.1 The final meeting provided the opportunity to reflect upon what had been learnt as a result of the scrutiny and to consider the recommendations arising from this.

3.7.2 One of the areas for consideration was the request for Members to provide guidance on how the Local Authority should work with academies (including the free school).

3.7.3 At present there is an element of differentiation between maintained schools and academies:

- Academies pay a higher cost for buy back services as they must pay full cost recovery and costs must include the additional insurance
- We invite Principals to some meetings and not others
- LA charges academies for access to the schools' e-circular but this includes some statutory messages so we then need to send those messages separately.

3.7.4 Some Local Authorities include all schools, regardless of

designation, to ensure that they can share information and provide a level of influence across all schools.

3.7.5 Given that we have academies and free schools in Halton, and that it is likely that this will continue to be the case, Members were asked if their view is that all schools are treated the same. In terms of the costs of any SLAs the charge should reflect full cost recovery.

3.7.6 All Members confirmed the view that we need to do the best for all children and young people in Halton, regardless of each school's designation, and make sure that a differential approach does not disadvantage Halton children, particularly those who are most vulnerable.

3.7.7 It was acknowledged that some schools were 'forced' down the academy route but we have seen some benefits from these schools who have used their experience and knowledge to support others within the Borough.

3.7.8 Members asked if the LA can hold academies to account for their expenditure as it was public funding. They were advised that accountability for the funding and any questions relating to this sits with the EFA and it was explained that all academies are subject to external audit. Members were informed that School Forum membership included representatives from both maintained schools and academies and that the membership was proportionate to the number of pupils in each sector. School Forum had encouraged academies to present information on their level of balances to ensure consistency and transparency. Some of the academies agreed to do this and had already presented their accounts.

3.8 The scrutiny concluded that there were a number of areas where a 'family of schools' approach would be beneficial. These included:

- Post 16 provision (linked through the commissioning statement)
- The development of specialist offers across secondary and post 16 provision
- the LA to share information across all schools and include all schools in briefings and meetings
- In the spirit of transparency academies would be requested to present financial information to School Forum on an annual basis.

3.9 **Recommendations**

- 1) To ensure that the LA can share information and provide a level of influence across all schools:

- all schools to receive the e-circular
 - all Head teachers and Principals to be invited to the Head teacher meetings with the Director
- 2) It was also concluded that consideration needs to be given to the charges that are currently levied to academies for access to Council services.
 - 3) Given that we have academies and free schools in Halton, and that it is likely that this will continue to be the case, it is suggested that SLA should be charged at full cost recovery rate only.
 - 4) It was recommended that officers continue to promote partnership working, encouraging academies to work with the Council, including the purchase of services through HBC SLAs.

4.0 **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 By working together as a family of schools there is more opportunity to provide consistency of provision across the borough, share good practice and jointly respond to both local and national challenges as a partnership.

5.0 **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 A review of the current charges for SLA services to academies will need to be undertaken. These costs will need to be compared to full cost recovery. The revised charging arrangements could result in a reduction to the income to the Council. The implications of any reduction would then be discussed with each service manager before a final decision on the change in charging is agreed. Consideration may need to be given to phasing in new charges over a number of years.

6.0 **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES**

6.1 **Children & Young People in Halton**

Improve outcomes for children and young people through strengthening the partnership between the LA and all schools.

6.2 **Employment, Learning & Skills in Halton**

None identified.

6.3 **A Healthy Halton**

None identified.

6.4 **A Safer Halton**

None identified.

6.5 **Halton's Urban Renewal**

None identified.

7.0 **RISK ANALYSIS**

7.1 All schools working together in partnership will strengthen the local provision and avoid a fragmented approach to education in Halton.

8.0 **EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

8.1 The proposal seeks to promote equality and diversity as it aims to treat work in closer partnership with all schools irrespective of their status.

9.0 **LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

None.