

## Learning New Ways: Academies and the local authority in Buckinghamshire - Scrutiny review 14 November 2012

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE





**Notes of review group meeting with Heads**

**8th November – John Colet School, Wendover**

	<b>Item/Topic</b>	<b>Actions</b>
	Present: Sharon Cromie (Head Teacher Wycombe Girls High), Christine McLintock (Head Teacher John Colet School, Wendover), Cllr Avril Davies (review chairman), Cllr Margaret Aston, Cllr Lesley Clarke, Sarah Holding (BCC Schools Relationships Manager)	
1	<p><b>Review aim</b></p> <p>The aim of the review is to explore working relationships between secondary academies and the local authority in Buckinghamshire following the passing of the Academies Act 2010. Particular areas of interest for the review group (led by Cllr Avril Davies) are standards, school place planning, and support for vulnerable children. The review is also interested to look ahead to future changes in the education system in Bucks including possible Free Schools, primary academies, and the changed role of the local councillor in terms of working with schools.</p>	
2	<p><b>Governance of Academies</b></p> <p>Heads expressed that governing bodies under new working arrangements were no longer restricted by local authority (LA) policy and were now more flexible and ‘can-do’. An example would be appointing fixed-term governors for specific projects (Wycombe Girls High has appointed a finance specialist for two years). In terms of requirements, academies have to have at least 2 parent governors although schools often have more (John Colet has 6). There remains a requirement for staff governors. Heads informed the review group that some academies advertise for governors and some invite applications. Heads suggested that most schools that converted to academy status retained most former governors and would be keen that local authority governors remain on the boards. Heads expressed strong support for timely induction of new Heads and governors into the Bucks family of schools.</p> <p>Heads informed the review group that schools now feel more transparent and accountable under new arrangements and feel that a clear line of financial accountability, combined with more rigorous inspection and complaints procedures, has improved accountability arrangements. Schools also feel and are expected to develop local solutions and feel less directed by the DfE than by the LA where performance targets felt ‘top-down’ and not always relevant. Schools are now able to set their own performance measures.</p>	
3	<p><b>Achieving high standards</b></p> <p>Heads informed the review group that under new arrangements, there has been an improvement in how schools can monitor achievement and that they are now able to identify and take any action promptly, including calling on peer support from other schools and being able to choose from a wider range of bought in services. Heads expressed that this flexibility marked an improvement compared to previous standard LA arrangements which were often perceived as patriarchal and ‘top-down’. Heads also commented that, under previous arrangements, LAs were often surprised to hear of low achievement (perhaps because LA governors were not reporting back the Council) and that, because of this, intervention was often too late to be completely effective.</p>	
4	<p><b>School improvement service</b></p> <p>Heads informed the review group that, as maintained schools, the school</p>	

	<p>improvement service was perceived as top down and not always able to meet the needs of schools. As academies, Heads prefer the choice of support options for admin, learning and pastoral issues, in particular to learn from other schools and from schools outside Bucks. Heads expressed that as a result of the new arrangements there had to be a culture change built around working collaboratively. Heads commented that changes to BCC school improvement service would need to recongise this culture change and adapt accordingly.</p>	
5	<p><b>Bucks Learning Trust</b></p> <p>Heads informed the review group that models similar to the proposed Bucks Learning Trust model exist in London and elsewhere and that they should be learnt from. Heads stressed that if the Trust is to be succesful then it will need to operate on a new culture of collaboration and inclusion away from a 'top down' approach and to be led by a dynamic, committed, listening and enabling team prepared to work with schools collaboratively. Heads commented that schools go in search of best practice wherever it can be found. Heads informed the review group that academies have a duty to collaborate and that a core function is to work with schools who need to improve and encouraged the local authority to use sucessful academies to support others.</p> <p>There was a general discussion around teaching schools with Heads commenting that there are incentives for schools to become teaching schools around leading a cluster of schools, developing staff, maintaing excellence, additional funding, possible building extensions, and wider reputational benefits for schools.</p>	
6	<p><b>Supporting vulnerable children</b></p> <p>Heads informed the review group that the vast majority of schools and Heads understand and are committed to their responsibilities towards vulnerable children, whatever their circumstances, and support the Fair Access Boards that are being established. Heads did not accept the suggestion that an excluded child would be limited to options only in the maintained sector. Schools are responsible for pastoral care and are able to learn from each other. For example John Colet has developed a protocol with local GPs around teenage pregnancy which can be shared with other schools where pupils might have difficulty accessing community services located further away. All schools have a choice around providing and paying for counselling and health services.</p> <p>Heads expressed strong support for the BCC Safeguarding in Education Team commenting that it was second to none and that they would not want to see it changed or disbanded in response to changes in the education sector. However, Heads commented that their experience of children's social care otherwise has sometimes been unsatisfactory in responsiveness and consistency. Likewise the Oxford Health CAMHS service, particularly with children and families who do not engage. Unlike adult mental health services there is no equivalent to the 'assertive outreach ' service, although where children and families do engage the Sue Nicholls Centre has had pronounced success.</p>	
7	<p><b>School Place Planning</b></p> <p>Heads informed the review review group that, because of changing demographics and the need for admissions policies to be responsive, schools would value a mechanism for early engagment with the planning process at District and County Council level stressing the need to be included at the Local Plan stage, and in understanding and being aware S106 &amp; community infrastructure levy negotiations determining financial support to existing schools, or the provision of new schools to serve a new development which may affect the catchment area of the school. Where speculative major developments</p>	

	appear Heads stressed the value of being involved formally or informally at an early stage.	
8	<p><b>Admissions and catchment areas</b></p> <p>Heads outlined that schools had been generally content around admissions and catchment areas under previous arrangements and in the early stages of academies but expressed concern over BCC's new home to school transport arrangements which has added some uncertainty and could further destabilise admissions arrangements. For example, school age children in Aston Clinton have been allocated to up to 3 schools as their nearest school. Heads also expressed concern about any new schools affecting admission numbers and school transport policy. Sharon Cromie commented that there is now effectively a price tag on grammar school places.</p> <p>Heads commented that the new school transport policy may drive schools to unilaterally declare new admissions policies and/or catchment areas and that a great variance of such policies could represent a threat to future school collaboration. Both Heads called for a review of the school transport policy, including the nearest school guidance and its affect on individual admissions policies and catchment areas, and requested that this review be done in close consultation with schools. Heads also informed the review group that new schools and new major housing developments would also have a significant impact on admissions policies and catchment areas.</p>	
9	<p><b>Role of Cllrs/Local Members</b></p> <p>Heads informed the review group that schools would welcome a relationship with local councillors either in the division or beyond and that it would be very useful for the role of the councillor in relation to Academies to be made clear to all. Previously Councillors may (but not always) have been perceived as being party political, or representing the local authority with whom relationships may not have been cordial. However, it would be extremely helpful for councillors in fulfilling their community leadership roles in supporting their local schools and their community to know the Head(s) and Chair of governors of schools in their divisions and be familiar with the school.</p> <p>It was suggested that as part of the councillor induction programme following the 2013 County elections that guidance should be included for councillors on getting to know local schools and the changes resulting from Academies legislation. An example of this could be new Councillors being presented with contact details of schools and Heads and for schools to be advised on details of councillors. It was suggested that an induction for new Heads on the work of councillors and councils would be beneficial and should be explored perhaps as future work of the Bucks Learning Trust. It was also suggested that an annual meeting between Heads and councillors across the county would be beneficial.</p>	
10	<p><b>Next steps</b></p> <p>Both Heads present to take the outcomes of the meeting to the next meeting of Buckinghamshire Association of Secondary Heads (BASH) on 14<sup>th</sup> November, and to seek other views and report back on their findings.</p> <p>To date, the review group has been operating under a working title. It was suggested that going forward the review should be titled Learning New Ways.</p>	Heads to take discussion to BASH

