

## **Working together: Academies and the local authority – scrutiny review**

***Meeting of review group with BCC officers – 17<sup>th</sup> October, 9.30am-11am***

### **NOTES**

#### **Attendance**

Members: Avril Davies (review chair), Lesley Clarke, Mike Appleyard (Cabinet Member for Education and Skills)

Officers: Sue Imbriano (Strategic Director, Children & Young People), Sarah Holding (School Relationships Manager), Steve Edgar (Head of Learning Trust), Nicola Cook (Governor Services Manager), Bridget Day (Safeguarding in Education), Stephan Chainani (School Place Planning), Ben Cahill (Policy Officer)

#### **Background to the review**

Avril Davies outlined the background to the review and work completed so far, including the review group's interest in services provided by BCC to schools around admissions, vulnerable children, and standards. In addition, the group are interested in the changed role of school governors and role of Councillors. To date, the review group have had informal meetings with BCC officers and secondary heads. A paper on the themes of the review was submitted to the Buckinghamshire Association of Secondary Heads (BASH) in September 2012. The review aims to report its findings and any recommendations to the BCC Cabinet on 10<sup>th</sup> December 2012.

#### **Overview of BCC services**

Mike Appleyard and Sue Imbriano provided an overview to the review group about changes to BCC services following the conversion of schools to Academies in Bucks. It was highlighted that the government's direction of travel is greater autonomy for schools and that BCC has taken a neutral stance to this position but that it will provide advice and support to schools considering conversion.

Despite the changed working relationship between Academies and local authorities resulting from Academies legislation, BCC retains a number of statutory responsibilities around provision of services, for example around admissions and support for vulnerable children. BCC has sought to be proactive in building good working relationships with schools in order to fulfil statutory and moral responsibilities to the children of Buckinghamshire and to identify alternative, long-term models for the provision of services.

It was highlighted that the authority is taking a collaborative approach to working with schools and is seeking to work on a traded basis for example the development of the Bucks Learning Trust which will be co-owned by all schools and will include former BCC services such as School Improvement.

#### **Fair Access**

Sarah Holding outlined that BCC still has a power to direct around provision for vulnerable children (a category that includes permanently excluded children, looked after children, traveller children, and the children of armed forces personnel) although this is used as a last resort after other strategies have failed. BCC has been working with the Buckinghamshire Association of Secondary Heads to develop Fair Access Boards in the

county and all schools have signed a Fair Access memo of understanding to resolve access matters through the Boards. There will be two Boards in the county (north and south) and they will be owned by schools. The Boards will be populated by Heads and will be chaired by Heads of Pupil Referral Units (PRUs). The Fair Access Boards will be implemented from January 2013.

More widely, Sarah Holding highlighted that Academies were now independent - not isolated - and that there were many examples of positive joint working as well as future areas of joint working to be explored.

The review group will seek further information on special school Academies, the capacity of Boards to work with Primary Academies, and wider planning for an increase in the number of Primary Academies in the county.

### **School Place Planning**

Stephen Chainani outlined changes to school place planning since the conversion of schools to Academy status highlighting that BCC has lost a power to direct in relation to places. It was stressed that estimating places has been complicated by the right of Academies to set their own admissions policies, and that further complications could arise from the development of Free Schools in the county. Despite this being a period of adjustment, it was stressed that relationships and negotiations remain constructive as ever.

Members expressed concern around the lasting perception that the local authority remains a 'safety net' for the placement of children in the advent of a school closure or problem with a school not being able to provide as many places as originally planned.

The review group were interested to learn about place planning resulting from new housing developments. Mike Appleyard stressed that until a housing application had been approved only estimates could be made and that accurate estimates relied on close working between District and County Councils and developers. The review group will look in to how closer working between housing, school planning and transportation could be achieved.

### **Safeguarding**

Bridget Day outlined that schools have a duty to promote welfare of their pupils and have a duty to cooperate with public bodies, for example Councils and the Police, around any arising issues in meeting this duty. It was stressed that schools delivered on this duty but that there was a potential risk that a school could choose to not disclose a concern to a local authority to avoid reputational implications for the school. The review group also suggested that the government's relaxation of rules around recruitment of teaching staff could result in risks around safeguarding. Despite these potential risks, it was stressed that there are good working relationships around safeguarding between schools and the local authority.

### **Governance**

Nicola Cook informed members that Governor Services has been operating as a traded service for a while and had adjusted accordingly to increasing numbers of Academies. The service provides clerking and advice specifically for Academies as well as more general support for governors. The service is well regarded and has seen an increase in business over the last year.

Broadly speaking, the role of an Academy governor is not significantly different to that of a non-Academy school governor. However the trustee and director role of Academies (under charity and companies legalisation) is a new development. Some governors became members of the Academy Trust and so have additional responsibilities. In addition, Academies can decide whether to have LA appointed governors which has had implications for the role of elected members in nominating school governors.

The review will seek further information on the changed role of the governor, and how governors are recruited and trained.

### **Standards and School Improvement**

In response to questions from members, Steve Edgar outlined that 'educational independence' represented perhaps the most attractive area of autonomy for schools when considering whether to convert to Academy status. However, schools were only eligible to convert to Academy status if they had been rated as outstanding or excellent by Ofsted and that this status exempted them from further Ofsted inspections until a defined trigger, like a change of head.

In terms of the impact on the BCC School Improvement Service, Steve Edgar outlined that the service has and will continue to become a lighter touch function, operating on a traded basis (within the Bucks Learning Trust). It was highlighted that the services Academies seek from the service were around 'triangulating' results with other schools, quality assurance, and advice trial inspections.

Steve informed members that the last Ofsted inspection framework made no reference to a role for the local authority but that the September 2012 framework enhanced a role for a governing body and the local authority. The review group will look to examine the new framework at a future meeting.

### **Next steps**

The review group will now seek to follow up on areas raised above. The review group will also seek to consult with Heads and BASH on themes of the review so far.

There will be a public meeting of the review group at 10am on 14<sup>th</sup> November, at New County Offices. This meeting will hear further evidence and submissions, discuss findings and define any recommendation areas for the final report.