

## **Children's Services Scrutiny Committee**

### **Report of the Select Committee considering the performance of Oxfordshire children at the end of Key Stage 1 (Year 2)**

#### **Background**

1. Results from tests taken in 2010 showed that overall schools in Oxford City scored lowest of all districts in England in Key Stage 1 (KS1) assessments. Following publication of these figures the then Cabinet Member for Schools Improvement asked the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee to review the Local Authority's approach to raising attainment at Key Stage One in Oxford, and to make recommendations accordingly.
2. The Local Authority was aware that there was underperformance in some of Oxfordshire's schools including some schools in the City of Oxford. Local Authority data has previously been used to compare performance against national and comparative neighbours and locally across three broad areas: Northern, Central and Southern parts of the county. This was the first time that the Department for Education produced tables showing results by Districts rather than at County level which brought this geographical issue more clearly into focus.
3. Underperformance in some City schools had been recognised and was one of the key drivers for the city schools re-organisation to a two tier system in 2003.
4. Officers reminded the committee that the problem of poor KS1 performance in some schools was not confined to Oxford City. In each of the District Council areas across the County, KS1 performance was recorded as poor in comparison with statistical neighbours; i.e. authorities deemed similar in nature for comparison purposes. Following further analysis of the data it was agreed that the review would look at the issue of raising KS1 performance across the whole of Oxfordshire.
5. The Committee chose to undertake the work through a one-off Select Committee style meeting. The meeting took place on July 5<sup>th</sup> 2011. A number of witnesses attended including officers from the Local Authority, senior staff from Oxfordshire schools and the present and past Cabinet Members for Schools Improvement.
6. In addition a number of papers were provided by colleagues from Oxfordshire, Warwickshire County Council and Bath and North East Somerset Council.
7. The committee also recognised that the Coalition government is planning to change the method of assessment at the end of KS1.
8. It is important to note that the Committee does not seek to apportion blame for the poor performance figures in some schools. Rather, members wish to identify what issues have hindered performance, what has helped to

improve performance in some schools; what is being done now and what more could be done to ensure all schools have high performance.

9. The purpose of the Committee's work could be summed up as seeking to answering the following questions:
  - i. What are the causes of poor performance?
  - ii. What are the reasons for varying success levels between schools with similar profiles?
  - iii. What is being done now to deal with the issue of poor performance?
  - iv. What more needs to be done so that performance levels of children at all schools be improved?

### **Select Committee Findings**

#### **Key Stage 1 Performance**

10. KS1 is an early milestone and it is important not to ignore the influence of both Early Years Foundation Stage Performance (EYFSP) and continuity into KS2. By the age of seven, most children are expected to achieve level 2. In Oxfordshire schools are encouraged to use 2B+ as a measure of success. The most able children would be expected to reach Level 3. Children who are judged as Level 2C are within the expected range, but just below average. Less able children will be scoring at Level 1.
11. Compared with KS2 tests, evaluation at KS1 is much less formal. The KS1 Assessments last for less than three hours altogether. The results are not reported separately, but are used to help teachers assess children's work. KS2 performance is assessed on specified days through formal tests which are externally marked. It is possible for teachers at KS1 to assess on the side of caution; if that happens then contextual value added (CVA) looks better at KS2.

#### **What are the causes of poor performance?**

12. Eligibility for Free School Meals is strongly associated with low achievement. Other indicators related to low achievement, as measured in the immediate area round a pupil's home, are related to child poverty and include:
  - i. Levels of unemployment
  - ii. Single parent households
  - iii. Parents with low educational qualifications
13. However there are a number of examples across the county where schools from similar areas with similar demographic backgrounds perform very differently. That would suggest that there can be school related reasons other than social circumstances that contribute to poor performance.

14. The National Audit Office has suggested that there are four further main factors that could affect performance:

- i. Ineffective school leadership
- ii. Weak school governance
- iii. Poor standards of teaching
- iv. Lack of external support (i.e. from the local authority)

15. These weaknesses can be characterised as follows:

- i. A reluctance to recognise that there is a problem
- ii. Low expectations of children and a culture of blaming the children
- iii. A belief that the problems of their children or school are unique
- iv. Knowing that there is a problem but not knowing how to fix it
- v. Knowing that there is a problem but not having the courage to challenge, staff, governors etc with the problem
- vi. Keeping governors, the LA, partners and other schools at arms length
- vii. Presenting a poor situation in a favourable light

16. Other factors that could affect performance that emerged during the meeting were:

- i. A failure to recognise the importance of Early Years education in strengthening and developing the later performance of children
- ii. A willingness to accept the status quo and so fail to set high expectations for the school and pupils
- iii. A lack of determination in challenging poor performance and dealing with under performance

17. Evidence and contributions submitted during the review confirmed the above as the major causes of poor performance.

18. The committee considered a number of programmes and interventions and wanted to know which had evidence of best impact. The findings were as follows;

19. **Developing Successful Schools Programme (DSS)**. DSS is a structured programme aimed at securing school improvement, raising standards of attainment and accelerating pupil progress by;

- i. Securing an ethos of collaborative learning
- ii. Strengthening LA and schools' capacity for improvement
- iii. Supporting schools in improving teaching and learning & leadership and management

20. Out of 14 schools included in the first year of the programme, 13 showed improved rates of progress between KS1 and KS2 whilst attainment at KS1 improved to above the Oxon and National Average in 9 of these schools.

21. In the second year, 2 schools out of 13 that have been inspected have moved from Satisfactory to Good and 2011 results so far indicate similar improved attainment to 2010 and accelerated rates of progress.

22. The main lessons from the programme were identified as follows:

- i. Systems and leadership across the school must be good if teaching is to be good.
- ii. There must be a clear culture of driving for improvement set by the Head teacher and governors.
- iii. Good schools have a consistent and encompassing shared vision.
- iv. Schools and early years settings need to have a focus on improvement to ensure every child receives the best education from the start.
- v. The importance of developing core skills must be front of mind for all teachers.
- vi. Expectations for all pupils and teachers must be set high.
- vii. External challenge and support is vital in improving performance.
- viii. A creative and engaging curriculum is very important.
- ix. Collaboration within the school to ensure there is continuity and progression of learning between early years/foundation stage, KS1 and KS2 is vital.
- x. Most teachers continuously improve provided that they are supported and encouraged. However where there is no improvement there should be effective and timely use of existing HR procedures.
- xi. All schools are different – one size does not fit all.
- xii. Challenge, both within the school and external, should be giving consistent messages – “Why can’t you be the best”?

**23. Improving Schools Programme (ISP).** The ISP is a national project aimed at improving schools that are falling below Government “floor” targets (i.e. schools falling below the government target of at least 60% of 11-year-olds getting level four in both English and maths tests and pupils making at least average progress between age seven and 11). The main focus of the ISP has been on supporting Head teachers to drive harder to raise KS2 attainment. However there is a clear link between improvement at KS1 and KS2 attainment levels; so the drive and determination of schools that improved at KS2 were reflected in their work at all levels including KS1. What is clear is that the most effective schools recognise the importance of raising attainment across the whole school.

There is some evidence that some headteachers underestimate the importance of the Early Years Foundation Stage in developing future

performance at KS1 and above. In some schools the least effective teachers are placed in Early Years rather than the strongest. Our most successful schools understand the importance of placing the best teachers in the early years classes to ensure that children have the best possible start.

24. Efforts should be made to ensure that Head teachers and Governors understand and value the very early years, including nursery, and put the necessary energy and effort into those levels.

### **What are the reasons for varying success levels between schools with similar profiles?**

In order to answer this question the Committee heard evidence from schools that were in disadvantaged areas where the received wisdom would suggest that performance could be expected to be low but where they achieve more than other similar schools.

25. What became clear is that performance is good where challenge and expectations are high for all pupils. Pre-conceptions should be challenged and discarded with clear expectations set, explained and understood. Pupils should be given the confidence to understand that they can achieve more than they expect.

26. Members heard of one initiative that provided opportunities for children to gather experiences away from the school. The Committee saw evidence of the benefits that could come from this philosophy via **the “Extra Mile” Project** that had been implemented across a group of schools in Oxford.

27. While it is accepted that finances do not allow the level of external activity undertaken for the “Extra Mile” all the time in all schools; it is clear that any opportunities to broaden pupils’ horizons creates an atmosphere of expectation that can lead to improved performance.

28. Members heard also from the Headteacher of a larger than average sized City school. The school had a high in-year turnover of pupils (around 30%). Pupils come from a wide range of backgrounds with well above average numbers of children from ethnic backgrounds. Around 50% of pupils have English as an additional language. The Early Years Foundation Stage is in two Reception classes. The numbers entering the lower end of the school, including the Early Years Foundation Stage, are increasing considerably, despite limited accommodation.

29. In spite of these challenges results continue to improve significantly year on year. This is partly because the school with the support of the LA, has developed a curriculum that has raised the quality of teaching and increased pupils’ enthusiasm for learning.

30. The underlying principles of the school are:

- i. To develop broadly educated, creative children working together in groups

- ii. To increase the self-esteem of all children in the school

31. And teachers, governors, parents and pupils are asked to consider:

- i. What makes a successful learner?
- ii. What hinders learning?
- iii. What promotes learning?

32. The answers to these questions have led to the creation of a curriculum that enables children to develop each level of their skills before moving on to the next skill. Children are encouraged to learn and develop with the aim of releasing the potential of the whole child. Importantly, it all starts at the Foundation stage where experienced teachers are employed to work with the new children. At KS1 special groups are identified and given appropriate support. Active reading is supported by students from the University.

33. The quality of teaching has been improved by training, development, monitoring and running demonstration lessons. Support staff receive regular training and the expectations of all staff have been raised.

34. These are just two examples of how schools in disadvantaged areas of Oxfordshire are able to achieve great things through hard work, imagination, challenge, high expectations and strong leadership and challenge and support from the LAs officers. If they can do it then so can others. In addition to showing what can be done, this gives a clear indication of the importance of spreading best practice across the County.

### **Federations**

35. The Committee next explored the benefits that could be achieved by federating schools. A federation is two or more schools agreeing to work together for the benefit of all pupils and their school communities. The Banbury Dashwood Federation is an example of a successful federation in Oxfordshire.

36. Members heard how Dashwood School had been in special measures. Once it had come out there was a need to secure the future and it was agreed that federation was the best way forward. The federation has an Executive Headteacher and two Operational Headteachers, one in each of the schools. There is one governing body with full responsibility for both schools.

37. A number of advantages of federation have been identified. There is a wider pool of staff expertise which both schools can tap into and schools can draw on each others experience with children at all age groups.

38. The learning experience can be broadened with, say, modern languages and performing arts' teachers from one school working with pupils from the other. There are things to learn on both sides for the advantage of all

pupils and students and joint training sessions have been undertaken and proved to be extremely productive.

39. There is also a strong business case for federation. Many of the daily aspects of running a school can be done in one central place by well qualified and experienced staff such as finance, health and safety, caretaking, ICT management and so on, leaving the Operational Headteachers to focus on teaching and learning and pupil and student progress and achievements in their own schools.
40. The federation has enabled some of the limited resources to be pooled with staff being employed across both schools. There are teaching assistants, ICT and finance staff, and some teachers employed to the benefit of both schools whom the individual schools would not have been able to afford.
41. These benefits have led to improvements in performance across the whole school.
42. Other collaborative arrangements can have equally strong benefits. Oxfordshire has a network of school partnerships. Where schools work well in close partnership better results have been seen through wider curriculum choice shared resources and sharing best practice, knowledge and expertise.

### **The role of Governors and the Local Authority**

43. The Committee was told that the Secretary of State expects schools to become more independent and self improving. Schools and governors are already responsible for the performance of their school. Support will be available from the LA with School Improvement Officers focussing much more heavily on targeting resources where there is most under performance and helping schools to support each other. The positive elements of support programmes will be emphasised and made part of training programmes offered in schools.
44. The role of governors becomes even more important in providing the right balance of support and challenge within the school and across schools. They must be supported and trained; given the confidence to carry out their roles effectively.
45. The importance of the relationship between governors and headteachers was discussed in some detail. The committee concluded that some Governors need to recognise that their role is not just that of a friend of the school but of a critical friend. They are there to monitor, review and challenge. Good governors do not simply accept that the headteacher is the main provider of information and data and they are prepared to act courageously and challenge any poor progress and weak leadership.
46. But for all governors to be able to do that they will need the support of the LA which, among other things, should ensure that the information that

heads and chairs of governors receive are shared and understood by all governors. Members heard that steps are being taken to ensure that this happens by information in future being sent to the clerks to the governors rather than to headteachers.

47. Local Authority nominated governors have a hugely important role to play in ensuring that governing bodies act effectively. They should all receive ongoing training to ensure that they can play a leading role on their governing bodies and act as a conduit between schools and the LA.
48. It was explained that procedures already exist to deal with underperforming teachers and heads although it has not always been a sufficiently fast process and not all heads and chairs of governors have taken up the formal processes when or as quickly as necessary. The Secretary of State has announced that he will be bringing in new measures to speed up the removal of underperforming teachers and head teachers in the Autumn of 2011 and heads and Chairs of Governors should be encouraged to use these procedures if insufficient improvement is made following appropriate support and training.
49. Members wondered whether this might be a good time to review HR procedures and to remind heads, governors and others of what tools are available to them in dealing with less than effective staff. This should coincide with the new changes.
50. Support for heads is essential but they must be challenged especially where there is no evidence of ongoing improvement within a school. Such action is bound to be difficult and governors may not wish to undertake it. However they have a responsibility to the children in the school to ensure everything is done to provide them with the best possible education. Support was expressed for the aim to provide information to all governors to enable them to ask questions and provide robust challenge.
51. Some contributors felt that smaller, more strategic governing bodies could be more effective and recommended that all governing bodies should insist on having an annual presentation on progress and performance at their school.
52. The best schools understand the importance of parents in the education of their children and go to great lengths to include them in the schools plans and approaches. The vast majority of schools do engage with parents but efforts should be made to ensure that all schools recognise the benefits that can be gained and learn from each other what works best.

### **What is being done now to deal with the issue of poor performance?**

53. Historically, many of the children starting in City primaries begin from a very low baseline i.e. with low recorded scores in the EYFSP and it takes beyond Year 2 for them to 'catch up' with their peers. However, statistics for 2010 suggest that EYFSP is much improved upon 2008 and it is in fact above the national average. The greatest improvement for this age group

has in fact been made in the Central area, i.e. the area containing the City. The performance of this cohort of children will be seen in the KS1 figures for 2012 and it is hoped that the improvement in EYFSP will be matched then.

54. A number of programmes have been implemented aimed at raising attainment generally. While none of them is aimed specifically at KS1 they all would be expected to have an effect across the whole of the school.

#### ***Improving Schools Programme (ISP)***

55. This programme has been referred to in some detail earlier in the report. It has been delivered in 26 schools across the County, 14 of these in the City of Oxford, over the last two years.

56. There has been significant success in many of these schools, and schools such as Wood Farm, Bayards Hill and Rose Hill came above the floor target for the first time in 2010. However, the engagement and determination of a school's leadership to improve is crucial to the progress made and where this has been less rigorous results are less impressive.

#### ***Developing Successful Schools (DSS)***

57. This is a programme designed to look at both teaching and management systems within schools in order to raise attainment of pupils and provide the tools to help a school move from being satisfactory to good. The benefits accruing from this programme have also been considered in some detail earlier in this report.

#### ***Communication, Language and Literacy Development (CLLD)***

58. This programme builds greater quality and capacity in the teaching of early literacy through developing work on speaking and listening, strengthening leadership and management of early literacy and supporting schools and settings with phonics and early reading.

#### ***ECaR (Every Child a Reader), ECaW (Every Child a Writer), ECC (Every Child Counts)***

59. ECaR comprises 1 to 1 daily reading sessions for children with the most significant reading difficulties delivered by trained 'Reading Recovery' teachers. These teachers also provide training for other adults who are then able to deliver other lighter touch interventions.

60. ECaW is provided for children in Years 3 and 4 aiming for them to achieve Level 3 writing by the end of Year 4.

61. ECC is designed to improve the mathematical skills of the lowest attaining Year 2 children (the lowest 5% in mathematical attainment) and includes those with Special Educational Needs.

### ***Interim Executive Boards (IEBs)***

62. IEBs have been established in schools where the governing body has been unsuccessful in ensuring that the necessary rigour is applied to challenging the school to improve. There is often resistance to this route but there is strong evidence that once an IEB is in place, progress of pupils accelerates.

### **What can be learned from others?**

63. Part of the evidence considered by the Committee came in the form of written submissions from Warwick City Council and Bath and North East Somerset Council.

64. Warwick City now tops the statistical neighbour group that includes Oxford City. However, in the past Warwick had similar concerns over KS1 as there are currently in Oxfordshire. Bath and North East Somerset leads the table of comparators to Oxfordshire as a whole.

65. Both of these authorities put a great emphasis on challenge and action. For example in Warwick, headteachers and Chairs of Governors of schools where there are concerns are required to attend termly *'Review and Intervention'* meetings with the Local Authority to report on the progress being made by pupils. This has had a "massive impact" with significant gains being achieved at both KS1 and KS2.

66. Bath and North East categorises schools as *'Priority and Targeted'* and those schools receive consultant/lead teacher support as appropriate.

67. Schools in Warwick are required to produce Learning Improvement Plans rather than School Improvement Plans, (similar to the Raising Achievement Plan used in Oxfordshire) and schools are challenged strongly on low pupil progress right from the Foundation Stage.

68. In Bath, assessment for learning has a high profile within the LA and there is strong moderation of Key Stage 1.

69. A key part of the raising of expectations by headteachers of their pupils' attainment in Warwick has been the headteacher Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programme. This is a series of termly whole day meetings, financed by the LA last year but 'bought into' by all headteachers this year. It has become the vehicle by which the LA has been able to challenge headteachers to do better and to successfully change the culture around low attainment. Great stress was laid upon the headteacher's role in planning for improvements in learning, monitoring progress and evaluating the impact of provision.

70. In Bath, OFSTED outcomes are analysed, good practice identified and common areas for development inform future CPD and support.

71. Each of these successful authorities has adopted similar but different approaches to the issue of performance and attainment. The common thread that runs through their methods is leadership, challenge and action. They identify areas of concern early and then become closely involved with the heads and governors of schools that are causing disquiet.
72. They emphasise the need for high expectations and the need to “do better” – coming back to the question identified earlier in this report – *why can't you be the best?*

### **What more needs to be done? - Conclusions and recommendations**

73. Reference was made by one speaker to the relatively recent past when there had been, “an air of complacency [about school improvement] in Oxfordshire”. The Committee was told by the past and present Cabinet Members for Schools Improvement that this view has been dispelled but that there is still room for improvement. The aim should be for there to be “no school below good in Oxfordshire”.
74. In summing up, it has to be remembered that local authorities do not manage schools. The LA's role is one of influence and encouragement to improve; it no longer determines how schools spend their money, what or how they teach, or how they are evaluated and assessed.
75. However the LA continues to have a major role in championing good outcomes for every child and must intervene when schools are seen to be struggling or at risk of becoming so
76. The Committee heard that around 70% of Oxfordshire's schools are currently judged “good” or better by Ofsted. They also heard that at Key Stage 1 the performance of Oxfordshire's schools throughout the County compared unfavourably to the County's statistical comparators.
77. Having said that, many examples of good practice exist and a number of those were described to the Committee. Furthermore there is a great deal of activity taking place aimed at improving performance and there are many signs of hope for the future.
78. However there is plainly no room for complacency and more needs to be done to ensure all schools reach the standard of the best. For example, none of the initiatives referred to above will achieve very much if they are simply put onto websites or written up in newsletters. The outputs should be formalised and ways found to effectively embed them into Oxfordshire's schools. The role of schools working together in partnership will be key to that and the LA has a strong role to play in facilitating that and making sure good practice is recognised, shared and adopted.
79. The main elements for success were shown to be:
- i. Effective school leadership
  - ii. Strong school governance

- iii. Excellent standards of teaching
- iv. Strong external support and challenge

80. Quite plainly those attributes need to be developed and maintained across the County. It was shown that the most successful schools expect the most of staff and pupils. They have high expectations and clear plans on how to achieve their aims. The question; *“Why can't you be the best?”* should be asked constantly.
81. There is no doubt that there would be benefits from the good schools supporting the not so good. Best practice in schools should be passed on by further developing federations or strengthening partnerships and collaborations between schools. Learning is more effective when passed on through the partnership and when schools challenge each other.
82. Whilst headteachers must lead they cannot improve a school on their own. Everybody; the head, governors, teachers, parents, children and the LA must be clear of their roles and what is expected of them in order to achieve more. Stronger and more courageous internal and external challenge of all underperformance in schools from governors, local authority governors and the local authority is required.
83. Earlier input, including formal conversations with heads and governors, when there are early concerns about progress should take place with time limits being set on improvement where schools are seen to be not achieving at the expected level.
84. More ongoing and improved governor training should be required for all governors and specifically LA governors with an increasing use of Interim Executive Boards where necessary to improve school leadership. There should also be earlier use of HR processes where progress remains unacceptable.
85. There should not be just concentration on deprived areas and obviously poor performing schools. Schools in more affluent places that should be doing even better should be targeted to ensure that expectations of high achievement are in place and realised. This would have the effect of bringing up the level of performance across the whole County. Given the reduced level of LA resources the importance of school to school and governing body to governing body support and challenge will become increasingly relevant.
86. Generally there should be an acceptance of only the highest standards with a minimum aim to be set that all children should be able to be within walking distance of a school that is at least “good” by the year 2013. In order to begin to work towards that aim the following recommendations are made.
87. The recommendations relate to the “main elements for success” identified during this review (as shown in paragraph 81 above). They will be sent to the Cabinet Member for Schools Improvement and the Directorate for

Children, Education and Families who will all be expected to respond to the Scrutiny Committee in December 2011.

## **Recommendations**

### ***Effective School Leadership***

- 1. The importance of strong leadership, high expectations of pupils and staff, the achievement of excellent standards and the consequences of failing to achieve those aims should be made clear to everybody involved with Oxfordshire's schools.**
- 2. The Local Authority should broker further discussions with schools across the County aimed at increasing the number of federations and strengthening partnerships. The committee recommends that schools continue to build on and formalise existing partnerships and to develop other innovative collaborative arrangements including federation so that all schools can benefit by 2013.**

### ***Strong School Governance***

- 3. The interventionist role of LA governors on governing bodies should be made clear, appropriate training given and LA governors should be expected to produce six-monthly reports to Director on "their" schools; beginning in 2012.**
- 4. By April 2012 dates should have been agreed for heads, governors and LA staff to be given training in understanding the importance of the role of the "critical friend" and undertaking strong and swift action where it is required.**
- 5. HR processes should be reviewed in the light of national policy changes in October 2011 and implemented no later than April 2012 to ensure that they are sufficiently robust and capable of swift implementation. Training and information to be provided to head teachers and governing bodies.**

### ***Excellent Standards of Teaching***

- 6. Examples of best teaching practice should be recognised and shared more widely across all schools.**
- 7. Recognition of the importance of the very early years in making sure children have a good start must be more widely understood and the evidence of investing the best teachers in early years should be shared widely with head teachers, governors and parents.**
- 8. Accurate assessment of children's progress should take place at all stages and the practice of "erring on the side of caution" when marking at KS1 should be challenged.**

### ***Strong External Support and Challenge***

9. Formal meetings should take place between the Director of Children, Education and Families and headteachers and chairs of governors as soon as progress is seen to be causing concern. The meetings should result in a recovery plan being produced within six weeks and be followed by termly progress meetings.
10. If no progress is made within an agreed timescale, action should then be taken to change school leadership. Interim Executive Boards would be established to replace governors if no progress is demonstrated.
11. In order to improve the sharing of good practice across schools, governor partnership groups should be established supported by LA officers.
12. All successful initiatives, such as DSS and ISP, should be formally reviewed, shared and the practice embedded into Oxfordshire's schools.

### ***Implementation and Monitoring***

13. An improvement strategy should be sent to the Scrutiny Committee by December 2011 with a detailed implementation plan including names of those accountable for putting it into operation and specific actions and milestones for measuring progress.

### **Acknowledgements**

88. The members of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee wish to thank everybody who contributed to the select committee whether in person or by written submission.