

## **CABINET – 18 DECEMBER 2018**

### **ITEM 4 – QUESTIONS FROM COUNTY COUNCILLORS**

Questions received from the following Members:

#### **1. Question from Councillor Howson to Councillor Constance**

“Leaving aside East West Rail and the GWR electrification project, what progress on other rail projects has there been in Oxfordshire during 2018?”

#### **Answer**

#### **Questions from Councillor Turnbull to Councillor Lindsay-Gale**

2. A key part of the SEND sufficiency of places strategy is ensuring that all mainstream schools support an inclusive approach to education. How confident are you that schools will be receptive to this approach, and what steps are being taken to ensure that academies, and not just maintained schools, adopt this inclusive approach?

#### **Answer**

The code of practice states that where possible all children should be educated in a mainstream school, but especially when this is requested by the parent.

In many cases schools can sometimes feel that they lack the experience and expertise to meet some children’s needs in a mainstream environment. We have a high level of special educational needs expertise across the schools in Oxfordshire and by using this expertise to upskill our schools, where we/they have identified they require support, it will empower them to be able to meet more children with SEN in their local school.

In the autumn term 2018 a series of briefings were conducted in the North, Centre and South of the county where this was shared with Headteacher’s, Governors Inclusion leaders and SENCOs of both Academy and Maintained schools. The feedback from those that attended was very positive and agreed that this was the right direction to be taking. We work in the same way with academies and maintained schools in relation to special educational needs and will continue to foster and further develop our relationship with all schools in relation to an inclusive approach.

Oxfordshire LA have already identified that it needs to review the funding that is paid to schools to support children with special educational needs. We are hoping that with the above and a clear funding model this will also help to further support schools to meet all children’s needs.

In addition to the above, Ofsted have announced a change to the inspection framework from September 2019, which ensures that schools remain responsible for children who are on roll and have accessed alternative provision. Therefore the journey of a child's progress and provision be it at the school or at an alternative placement will be more closely tracked, this greater focus in the inspection framework can only improve the provision provided for all children in all types of schools.

"3. The decision of the Cabinet in June to support a consultation to close Northfield School was extremely stressful for everyone involved with the school - a school that was already having to operate out of temporary classrooms across two sites because the main school building had been allowed to deteriorate. As Cabinet is now being asked to agree to rebuild and expand Northfield School (which when suggested by the Labour Group we were told was not an option) I would like to ask what lessons have been learned from this process about the way that the County Council manages its maintained schools, and special schools in particular?"

### **Answer**

"As stated in the question, the decision to look at closing Northfield was a stressful and difficult time for all. In April of 2018 due to a temporary school closure it became clear that the school building was not fit for purpose and this resulted in the need for the temporary provision across the two sites. It was at this time that the need for options to be explored was required as the situation was totally unprecedented. As a result, the consultation paper was presented to enable the Council to gather the necessary information to inform any future proposal.

The consultation took place to determine views on

- Close the Northfield School, placing current students in alternate and more suitable provision, pending the outcome of the SEND Review
- Continue to operate Northfield School as is, pending the outcome of the SEND Review

The clear feedback from a range of stakeholders including parents of children at the school, students, staff, Unions, MPs and presentations made to Cabinet by members of the public was that they were not supportive of the proposal to close the school and were very keen to consider all other options rather than closure.

A further consideration was that at the time of the decision the school had over 50 pupils on roll and when looking at the local market it was clear that to place these children in alternative school placements would not be possible. All maintained special schools in neighbouring authorities who take children with special needs such as those at Northfield, advised that they did not have any available places, and those schools in the independent sector, where places might have been available, could not accommodate the number of children who we would have needed to place at short notice.

Therefore, all these factors were taken into consideration in the decision to bring the proposal to Cabinet to rebuild Northfields as the best option for the children and young people with such complex needs.

There have been a number of valuable lessons learnt from this process: -

- The clear need for a Council SEND Sufficiency of Places Strategy. The timing of this strategy was driven by the need for more places and this was clearly exemplified by the Northfield's situation.
- A survey of all Special Schools has been conducted to build the Council's knowledge of the condition of schools and working in partnership with Property services to develop a capital works programme for our schools.
- Review the delegation of repair and maintenance responsibility and budget with our schools
- Establish clearly defined and approved governance process to expediate decision making should an emergency situation arise and that key senior managers are pre identified to lead on the operations and decision making needed.
- Review our business continuity plan and budget for emergency school closure"