

Division(s):

CABINET 25 November

PROVISION OF EDUCATION SERVICES TO OXFORDSHIRE SCHOOLS

Report by Director for Children's Services

Introduction

1. Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) is committed to externalise services where savings or efficiencies can be generated and effectiveness retained or increased.
2. As part of the externalisation initiative, the authority has agreed to enter into a much larger partnership with Hampshire County Council to provide back office services to schools through an Integrated Business Centre (IBC). In April 2014, Cabinet recommended that consideration should be given to a further partnership with Hampshire to run services that support schools in Oxfordshire to improve their learning outcomes.

Findings

3. Such a partnership would have been run separately from the IBC and would have included the following.
 - a. School Improvement Services
 - b. Services for Vulnerable Learners
 - c. Foundation Stage Learning
 - d. Governor Services
4. Since the Cabinet decision there have been discussions with colleagues in Hampshire and a careful consideration of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities of such a partnership. The proposal was explored on the basis of its potential to: release savings; enhance the quality of support for schools; and increase the capacity to provide such support.
 - a. Savings Costs have been hard to establish with confidence (apart from one off reduction in OCC management posts) and there are, therefore, no predictable financial benefits from engaging in the partnership. In addition, Hampshire has indicated they would charge for running services in Oxfordshire, whereas the first principle had been a merger of service at no cost.
 - b. Quality of support for schools There are a number of areas where policy differences between the two authorities have been highlighted (eg OCC's practice in relation to 'edge of care'; Looked After Children; and

Children in Need). A particular local strength includes the approach to vulnerable children which is more closely aligned to national policy and there are significant differences in OCC's approach to integration with Children's social care through the revised approach to vulnerable learners which will capture almost all "children in need" in school and other learning settings.

- c. Capacity No firm evidence emerged that a partnership would increase the capacity to deliver services to schools. Hampshire has acknowledged there are significant differences in the way Early Years services are delivered.

5. It is clear also, that a merger could take some time to become efficient and effective. In particular, the advantage of retaining services in Oxfordshire County Council carries substantial benefits given current budgetary constraints in relation to the 'Early Help Offer' as by working more closely with schools we should be able to develop a more effective and efficient approach to early intervention to better partner the work done within the authority.

6. Officers have concluded, with regret, that benefits will not be realised to a sufficient degree to be advantageous to either the Council or the schools and pupils for which and for whom it provides. This view has been confirmed and acknowledged in an exchange of letters between the Director for Children Education & Families and the Director for Children's Services in Hampshire.

RECOMMENDATION

7. **The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to agree that Oxfordshire County Council should formally withdraw from work to develop a partnership arrangement with Hampshire County Council in relation to school based services.**

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November 2014