

Education Scrutiny Committee Annual Report 2013/2014

19 March 2014

What has the approach of the Committee been to these new arrangements? Is it working?

The Education Scrutiny Committee has a membership of 11 county councillors and 4 co-opted members. The county councillor membership is politically proportional to the membership of the Council. The Committee met 6 times in 2013/2014.

There is a standing working group chaired by Cllr John Howson, focusing on educational attainment. A Select Committee has been formed to look at the issue of Ofsted inspections and investigate how the Council would fare in the event of an Ofsted inspection of the Council's school improvement arrangements. In light of Ofsted's criticism of school support services in Norfolk and the Isle of Wight, the Committee found it essential to articulate a clear vision of the role of the Council in education and to ensure its responsibilities are fulfilled successfully.

Some of the key functions of the Committee include:

- Assisting the Council in its role of championing good educational outcomes for Oxfordshire's children and young people;
- Providing a challenge to schools and academies and holding them to account for their academic performance;
- Promoting joined up working across organisations in the education sector within Oxfordshire, and developing closer relationships with schools;
- Review the bigger picture affecting academic achievement in the county so as to facilitate the achievement of good outcomes;
- Contributing to the development of educational policy in the county;
- Reviewing approaches to school improvement and support services
- Reviewing governance
- Reviewing and understanding resource allocation

What particular issues has the Committee focused on? What successes have there been (incl. case studies)?

Ofsted Inspection Framework

In May 2013 Ofsted introduced a new performance framework which will consider how well a council is fulfilling its general duty to promote high standards of education and to enable every child to fulfil their educational potential. The Committee has been involved in this area in a number of ways:

- It looked at the Ofsted framework for the inspection of local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement;
- It analysed evidence from CEF on how the Council addressed the requirements of the Ofsted framework for the inspection of local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement;

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- It considered practice and lessons to be learnt from the experience of other local authorities.

The Committee decided to constitute a select committee to focus specifically on the Ofsted Inspection Framework, reflecting the commitment of the Education Scrutiny Committee to play an active role in improving education in the county alongside the Cabinet Member and officers.

Academies

Oxfordshire County Council has been supportive of the Academies agenda, and a growing number of schools are opting to become academies, independent of the Council. This has raised some questions regarding the role the Council can play in relation to academies, especially in terms of holding academies accountable for performance. Monitoring and providing challenge and support remain clear roles for the Council as it seeks to raise pupil achievement across the whole area. The Education Scrutiny Committee plays a key role in enabling the Council to fulfil its duties as champion for all children in Oxfordshire. This has included taking an overarching look at the quality of education across Oxfordshire and asking questions about any poor attainment levels, regardless of school type.

The Committee heard that 2013 had seen a steady stream of conversion within Oxfordshire. It is anticipated that by April 2015 40-50% of existing schools will be academies. It was reported that officers have built new relationships, learning to work with academies in different ways, and that groups of schools converting at the same time were easier to deal with.

A challenge was present to CEF on the changing role of Local Authorities in relations to academies, with a paper to be presented at the next meeting of the Committee.

Use of the Pupil Premium

Schools use pupil premium funding differently. Scrutiny challenged the use of pupil funding and sought to gain an understanding of local practices and what works best. Through its work, the Committee has helped offer a holistic view in terms of the pupil premium, the selection of children who might benefit and the sharing of good practice from other authorities.

The Committee invited Cherwell School to give evidence about the school's use of pupil premium. The Committee looked at what works and noted the success of the school in making an impact through the pupil premium. In the future, members will invite schools from deprived areas to see how this funding can be utilised to improve attainment.

Attainment

Oxfordshire is a world class academic and research centre. However it has a relatively weak education attainment performance at primary and secondary school level. As such, the members of the Committee are keen to focus on understanding the causes for underperformance and exploring ways to improve achievement.

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The Education Attainment Working Group led by Cllr Howson was set up to gather evidence on schools' performance, to review and challenge the existing school improvement and support services and to recommend practical measures to raise attainment. The Councillors worked closely with Children, Education and Families (CEF) officers to get an overview of school attainment across Oxfordshire, and compare results with similar councils and with wider national and international trends. Analysing national comparison figures released in December 2013, the working group was satisfied that the Council is tackling the issue of improving attainment and is taking appropriate action where needed.

This was followed on by an in-depth analysis of a case study comparing a high performing school and an underperforming school of similar size and make-up. This exercise revealed some of the key factors responsible for improving performance, such as strong and inclusive leadership.

Further the group recommended that a School Improvement Framework Briefing meeting for Councillors is organised, which received the support of the full Committee. Moving forward, the members of the Education Attainment working group are keen to focus on attainment in primary schools and on establishing successful mechanisms for the dissemination of best practice.

What impact/influence has the Committee had over decision making? Where have we clearly and quickly seen the impact of the Committee's work?

Home to School Transport Policy Proposal

In July 2013 the Committee had before them a report on the Proposed Home to School Transport Policy, together with a summary of the consultation responses received. Having assessed the policy document and the way the public consultation was carried out, the Committee raised a number of concerns. In particular, it was felt that the consultation had not been sufficiently clear about who was affected and how. There were also concerns about whether the consultation had targeted the right people and groups and whether enough time was allocated for the public to express their views.

While the initial policy was put on hold when the Department of Education withdrew its Guidance issued on March 2013, the Committee played a key role in pushing for thorough and extensive consultation with the public when the revised version of the Home to School Transport policy was published for consultation. By providing constructive challenge, the scrutiny helped develop and refine the proposed policy and it served as a forum for parents, Head teachers and other stakeholders to express their views regarding the draft policy.

This was particularly important when the revised draft policy was put in front of the Committee in February 2014. At that meeting the Committee listened to evidence from the officer involved in the drafting of the policy, County Councillors from across the political spectrum, education experts and local action groups. The Committee engaged extensively with the speakers who gave evidence, providing challenge and

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scrutiny. The Committee agreed a set of key recommendations, which were then taken to Cabinet who voted in support of all the recommendations made by the Education Scrutiny Committee.

The Committee requested further work to be undertaken in regard to safe routes, admissions policies, and the taxi budget, and asked for the study of alternative transport arrangements and the dissemination of best practice to be included in this work. The Committee also expressed its interest to press the government to overhaul the principles of home to school transport in the light of the new Post 16 regulations.

Forward planning

As part of its role in reviewing governance agreements and resource allocation, the Committee have agreed to invite the Schools' Forum to address the Committee. It will also continue investigating ways to improve results in Science and will analyse the performance of primary schools. The Committee is committed to using its expertise to make recommendations and help disseminate information and best practice. The Committee will continue to provide challenge and scrutiny to ensure that the Council delivers on its role as champion of all children in Oxfordshire.