

CABINET – 16 NOVEMBER 2010

ITEM 4 – QUESTIONS FROM COUNTY COUNCILLORS

Questions received from the following Members:

1. Cllr Jean Fooks to the Cabinet Member for Schools Improvement:

“I am sure that Cllr Waine shares my disappointment at the very poor Key Stage 1 results published last week. Oxfordshire’s performance is poor; Oxford City’s is frankly appalling. For the standards of reading, writing and arithmetic of children in city schools to be the lowest in the country is a sad indictment of the education they have received. To what does he attribute these results? What measures will he put in place to ensure that Oxfordshire’s children, and Oxford’s in particular, reach at least the national average standard in reading, writing and arithmetic in 2011 and thereafter?”

Answer

We have long recognised that the performance of some schools in the City has been wanting. It is perhaps unfortunate that your group have often resisted some of this administration’s more radical strategies to deal with underperformance to the point of obstruction, particularly when some of those at secondary level are beginning to bear fruit.

Local Authority intervention at the primary level has not always been popular with schools or communities but they are made precisely because improvements are not being made at the pace we believe to be necessary.

We await with interest the imminent White Paper on Education which will, we hope, among other things, indicate the extent to which the Local Authority will be able to intervene in the future to shift stubborn performance in schools.

The published data relate to the performance of schools as defined by reference to the City Council boundary but, of course, the community of schools which serves the City, as most of us understand it, extends beyond the City Council boundary.

Pupil characteristics in the Oxford area show a diverse population of children with a significantly higher number of children who have English as an additional language (28%) compared to the county (9.5%), there are also high levels of mobility, higher levels of pupils with special educational needs and a significantly greater number of children able to claim free school meals.

Significant work has been undertaken across schools where there is underachievement. The support for reading, mathematics and communication includes courses for teachers to deepen subject knowledge in English and mathematics as well as individual work with children by specially

trained teachers. Within the City, 13 of the 21 primary schools are targeted as part of these programmes which includes:

ECaT - Every Child a Talker early years programme to build literacy skills.

ECaR - Every Child a Reader - Reading recovery programme - individual work with children by specially trained teacher through a short term intervention

ECC - Every Child Counts - Mathematics programme where children are taught by specially trained teacher 30 minutes every day for 12 weeks

CLLD - Communication, Language and Literacy Development - programme across early years and Key Stage 1

Targeted training for teachers in Assessment and Moderation for Key Stage 1, and in the use of APP (Assessing Pupil Progress).

In addition since September 2010 we have been running a 'securing Level 2' course for targeted schools (all schools on the National Strategies 'Maximising Progress' [known as Developing Success in Oxfordshire] and 'Improving Schools Programme' (ISP) were prioritised. We have also been putting on Subject Leader courses that support teachers in using data and moderating standards.

We have increasingly over recent years prioritised a greater proportion of early intervention and targeted support to our City schools and are beginning to see good improvement in EYFSP results.

Local Authority intervention has included challenging school leaders to improve outcomes, this has, in particular, involved more rigorous expectation of leadership and management at all levels. We have used our powers to replace two schools' Governing Bodies where we have concluded their progress is insufficient with Interim Executive Boards (IEB) and in addition two headteachers have left their posts following LA action.

In addition seven of the City schools have had a formal LA review in the same period resulting in clear recommendations for their next steps and in most cases the necessary improvement.

School governors, particularly LA governors have been continually challenged to be more critical of their schools performance, and to identify and monitor the strategic measures to bring about the necessary improvements.

2. Cllr Jean Fooks to the Cabinet Member for Growth & Infrastructure:

"The Department of Communities and Local Government has recently issued a consultation document which asks for an opinion on the government's intention to remove from local councils the determination of planning applications for Free Schools. Will Cllr Hudspeth assure me, and the public, that he will be responding in the strongest terms that this is an unacceptable

interference with local democracy? Will he further deplore the apparent intention to encourage the setting up of Free Schools without any of the normal checks on the suitability of the site or the possible traffic problems – I understand that new schools will not be required to have a Travel Plan to minimise the impact on local traffic and nearby residents of the proposed school access?"

Answer

The Conservative/ Liberal coalition government has issued a consultation document that, as it stands, suggests that any building may be used for a 'free school' without seeking planning consent. This means that transport assessments, travel plans, highway contributions, parking standards and changes to the highway needed for the school will not be provided. This is unsatisfactory from a transport point of view. All changes of use that have an effect on the highway have to be assessed and appropriate mitigation measured provided. We would also wish to see safeguards which would ensure that the current minimum standards which apply to new school buildings are applied also in relation to change of use. However, we are supportive of the *principle* of free schools, particularly if, for example, they address the pressure on school places in, for instance, Oxford city.

A response will be sent from this Council expressing these concerns about this proposal.

3. Cllr Liz Brighouse OBE to the Leader:

"Item 8 – Business Strategy

As a result of the transferral of a number of specific grants into the formula grant, and the scrapping of others, this Council is faced with the prospect of making £58.65 million of cuts in the 2011/2012 financial year – over a third of the total cuts 'package'.

(a.) Will the Leader please comment on why he thinks the government have decided to implement the cuts in this way

(b.) Will he admit that this strategy is a means by which the coalition government can frontload the pain in the hope that people will have forgotten by the next general election

(c.) What implications does he expect this frontloading to have in terms of

(i.) the number of Council staff who will lose their jobs who may not have otherwise

(ii.) the ability of the Council to incrementally change the way it works."

Answer

"I am not privy to the deliberations of our coalition government so am not able to answer definitively for them. I have no doubt the Spending Review process has been a difficult one and has involved considerable work in prioritising spending plans. The

coalition government has clearly decided it is necessary to eliminate the structural budget deficit inherited from the previous administration speedily so as to restore confidence in this country's ability to manage its finances responsibly again. The coalition government has committed to maintaining spending on health and overseas development. It has also clearly given a high priority to maintaining our defence effectiveness and to the funding of schools. These are priorities few would challenge. The result is a heavy burden for other spending areas, including local government. This is the price we must pay for Gordon Brown's legacy as Chancellor and Prime Minister when he financed revenue spending since 2001 onwards by adding to our debt year-on-year.

- (a) I most certainly do not. I suspect the coalition government has understood the need to re-build confidence in this country's finances after Gordon Brown's profligate years of running a structural budget deficit during economically good times. In simple terms, he failed to mend the roof while the sun shone.
- (c)
 - (i) It seems to me to be singularly pointless to speculate about the impact on our staffing numbers by meaningless comparisons between the impact of Gordon Brown's planned 20% cut in public spending and the coalition government's proposed cuts which average 25%. It seems equally pointless to attempt any comparison based on different ways of spreading spending cuts over the medium term plan period.
 - (ii) This council is fortunate because it has been planning for significant cuts in public spending for eighteen months now and had already made provision for substantial cuts in its current medium term plan. Although the cuts signalled in the Spending Review 2010 are large and front-loaded, this council will be working hard to deliver good quality services within the financial envelope made available in the local government settlement to be announced in early December.

4. Cllr Roy Darke to the Cabinet Member for Adult Services:

"Item 9 – Financial Monitoring

This report highlights some very serious issues for adult social care. Social care overspends are not under control, the bed based model used for Fairer Charging and Residential Client Income is inadequate, and the Older People, Physical Disabilities and Equipment Pooled Budget is under massive pressure. What is the Cabinet Member for Adult Services doing to make the government aware of these problems and will he urgently contact the government and tell them that the recent £2 billion of extra funding for social care is a pittance when placed in the context of the challenges local authorities face in this area?"

Answer