Final Report of the School Improvement Strategy Task Group

Purpose of the report

1. To present the findings and recommendations of the task group for endorsement by the committee and referral to the Cabinet Member for response.

Background

2. At the 14 October 2014 Children’s Select Committee meeting it was agreed to include the School Improvement Strategy as a work priority and receive a pre-meeting information briefing on the School Improvement Strategy in spring 2015 and establish a task group to look at the impact of the Strategy in summer 2015.

3. The Business Plan 2013-17 includes the following Key Deliverable: “4. [We will] Provide opportunities for every child and young person to improve their attainment and skills so they can achieve their full potential.”


5. It was resolved by the Children’s Select Committee on 14 April 2015 to establish a task group to consider the effectiveness of the School Improvement Strategy in its first year, including a comparison with approaches in other local authority areas.

Terms of reference

6. After consideration the following terms of reference were agreed by the task group at their meeting on 12 April 2016 and endorsed by the Children’s Select Committee on 31 May 2016:

   1. To review the efficiency and effectiveness of the Wiltshire School Improvement Strategy.
   2. To compare Wiltshire’s School Improvement Strategy with those of other local authorities.
3. To make recommendations aimed at meeting our collective goal of ensuring all pupils attend an excellent school and achieve their full potential.

Membership

7. The task group comprised the following membership:

   Cllr Philip Whalley  Wiltshire Councillor (Chairman)
   Cllr Trevor Carbin  Wiltshire Councillor
   Dr Michael Thompson  Clifton Diocese Representative
   Mr John Hawkins  Teacher Representative

Methodology

8. The task group has received written and/or verbal evidence from the following witnesses:

   Wiltshire Council witnesses

   Cllr Laura Mayes, Cabinet Member for Children’s Services
   Cllr Richard Gamble, Portfolio Holder for Schools, Skills and Youth
   David Clarke, Head of School Effectiveness
   Jayne Hartnell, Manager – Risk Assessing School Performance and Effectiveness
   Fred Angus, Manager for Teaching, Learning and Partnerships
   Helen Southwell, School Improvement Coordinator
   Tracy Cornelius, Wiltshire Improvement Adviser (WIA)
   Tina Evans, School Improvement Adviser (SIA)

   Other Witnesses

   Gloucestershire Council:
   Jane Lloyd Davies, Head of Educational Development and Inclusion
   Barry Jones, Strategic Lead
   Sandra Shepherd, Strategic Lead
   Caroline Coates, Strategic Lead

   Hampshire County Council:
   Eric Halton, County Education Manager (Professional Learning)
   Janet Barrow, Business Manager - Education and Inclusion and HIAS Business Unit
   Mandy Parsons, Head of Governor Services

9. The task group also considered the following evidence sources:

   Wiltshire School Improvement Strategy 2015-2017
   Wiltshire Maximising Achievement Programme Toolkit 2015
   Wiltshire School Improvement Programme Impact Summary 2015-2016
   Final Report of the Wiltshire Schools and the Local Authority Task Group
10. The task group met on ten occasions between 01 March 2016 and 24 January 2017. The task group also met with officers from Gloucestershire Council on 22 September 2016 and Hampshire County Council on 05 December 2016. Members of the task group attended two Local Authority School Effectiveness Review (LASER) meetings and a School Effectiveness Review (SER).

Evidence

The Wiltshire School Improvement Strategy (Context)

11. The Education Act 2011 states that local authorities (LA) should promote educational excellence, ensure fair access to services, and act as champion for vulnerable children and young people. In addition, the LA retains specific duties related to school improvement under the Education Act of 1996 and the Education and Inspection Act of 2006. These include a general responsibility to promote high standards in maintained schools. In order to carry out these duties, the LA retains powers to identify and intervene in schools causing concern. However, the LA no longer has the powers to intervene in Academies or Free Schools, as this responsibility now sits with the Regional Schools Commissioner.

12. In Wiltshire the School Effectiveness Service has the primary role of ensuring that core responsibilities in relation to monitoring, challenging, supporting and intervening where necessary in Wiltshire’s schools are carried out effectively. In order to achieve this the School Effectiveness Service focuses on three areas and aims to:
   a. understand school performance, context, and needs;
   b. support high quality improvement activity;
   c. support improvement to outstanding outcomes for disadvantaged learners

This report reviews the first two of these aims and the third is addressed as a recommendation.

13. There have been significant government statements and legislation affecting both schools and the role of LA’s during 2016. The Education for All Bill 2016 originally required all schools to have become academies by 2022. The Secretary of State for Education subsequently lifted the forced academy conversion process, leaving schools not already academies the choice to
remain as a maintained school if they wished. The political rhetoric suggests however, that despite this “volte face”, incentives and pressure will be applied to encourage more schools to make the change. There are currently 76 academies in Wiltshire representing some one-third of schools. The other two-thirds of Wiltshire schools remain as LA maintained.

14. Recent government announcements on “Fairer Funding for Schools” will have a very considerable impact. From April 2019, all funding for schools and academies will come directly from the centrally based Education Funding Agency (EFA). Currently only academies are directly EFA funded whilst maintained schools have always received funding via the LA. This has permitted the LA, through Schools Forum, to consider the fair distribution of funds in an effective manner. The major reduction/removal of the Education Support Grant (ESG) will change the present financial arrangements which fund the LA’s School Improvement Service. Presently the transitional financial arrangements remain uncertain.

Wiltshire Council School Improvement Strategy Process

15. The role of Wiltshire’s School Effectiveness Service is set out in the Wiltshire Council School Improvement Strategy 2015-17, and aims to:
   a. Carry out robust quality assurance activities and to take rapid action where there is evidence that a school is performing poorly.
   b. Support school leaders by providing an external School Improvement Advisor (SIA) or Wiltshire Improvement Advisor (WIA) to help identify strengths and areas for development.
   c. Broker improvement activities such as school to school support, or through signposting professional development opportunities.

16. Essential to the implementation of this strategy is the LASER process and the need for good intelligence. This is necessary to identify and assess the level of risk in our schools so that an appropriate and correctly targeted level of early intervention and support can be provided. This intervention work is tailored to the particular needs of a school and agreed with the school. The ultimate aim of this work is not only to resolve weaknesses, but also to establish a regime of self-improvement within the school so that further intervention is unnecessary. Ideally all of this is achieved before particular problems are identified by an OFSTED inspection.

17. The intelligence is provided by various sources such the analysis of DfE data, and information from School Improvement Advisor and Wiltshire Improvement Advisor visits (SIA/WIAs visit all our schools at least 3 times per year), and the visits or routine work of other LA officers dealing with our schools. This could include matters for example raised by HR or Finance officers. A weekly meeting is held by key LA Officers and chaired by the Manager Risk Assessing School Performance at which officers review new data and identify changes in risk and initiate remedial actions.

18. The LASER process places all our schools into one of the following levels of risk. These are either Secure (and with no known risks) or Vulnerable (at risk of
providing an unacceptably low standard of education in the future) or Already Causing Concern (that is already providing a poor standard of education or very likely to).

19. The level of intervention and support follows on from this assessment. As a basic minimum all schools receive 3 half day visits from a SIA each academic year. However, for schools either Vulnerable or Already Causing Concern more intensive and escalating programmes of support are put in place with highly experienced and specifically trained WIAs who work more extensively with the school and school leaders to write improvement action plans and generate rapid progress. This is monitored through a regular series of School Effectiveness Review meetings within the school to ensure that the programme of change is monitored and embedded within the school. These meetings would typically be chaired by the WIA and be attended by, where possible, the School Leadership Team (SLT) and Chair of Governors.

20. The Wiltshire Improving School Programme (WISP) also provides a structured framework of school improvement modules for governors and school leaders that focus on robust and effective systems to improve outcomes.

21. The process is clearly, fully and methodically explained in the Wiltshire Council School Improvement Strategy document so all Wiltshire schools have an appreciation of the process.

The Role of SIAs and WIAs

22. The SIA/WIAs are a crucial component of the school improvement process. All maintained schools in Wiltshire are assigned a SIA and are provided 3 half-day visits each academic year. A WIA is usually assigned to those primary schools that require more intensive support. Academies are also given the chance to buy into this service.

23. SIAs/WIAs are employed on a consultancy basis and are either current or retired Head teachers. Workload depends on whether the SIA/WIA is still working as a Head Teacher. The maximum for a serving Head Teacher is 4 schools. Whereas a retired head teach may serve up to 11 schools.

24. All SIA/WIAs are selected following an initial training and induction programme. There is also an ongoing training programme provided 3 times a year and they are shadowed by the School Improvement coordinator in the early stages of their work and from then on there is a rolling programme as part of a quality control process.

25. SIA/WIAs write a report following each visit which is shared with the school and their governors. Schools have the option of buying additional visits if they wish (unless there are exceptional circumstances). Significant preparation is carried out prior to each school visit in order to ensure that the visit is bespoke and delivers best value.
26. Apart from supporting the school’s self-improvement processes the information gathered during visits is collated for consideration at LASER meetings to inform and identify “levels of risk” and the need for future intervention.

27. The programme of advisor visits helps pre-empt risks, allowing the schools and local authority to anticipate any potential issues. Advisors also broker school-to-school support in order to spread best practice. Advisors who are serving Heads can also disseminate best practice by bringing back positive working methods from their work to their own school.

28. Overall 179 of the 235 schools use the school improvement service. Approximately 50% of primary academies buy into the service and around 10% of secondary academies. In 2016 SIA's supported 155 schools and made a total of 510 visits. WIAs supported 24 schools, with a total of 197 visits.

Comparison with Other Local Authorities

Gloucestershire:

29. Gloucestershire has a similar portfolio to that of Wiltshire with 297 schools, of which 39 are secondary. The number converted to an academy status was broadly similar, as was the overall number of schools rated good or outstanding by Ofsted. However, unlike in Wiltshire, the Ofsted rating of their primary schools outperformed the secondary sector.

30. Their School Improvement Service was similar to that of Wiltshire although in its core offer to schools they only provide one free annual visit each year. This visit decided whether a school is “vulnerable” through reference to 20 key performance indicators.

31. Rather than using former and serving Heads as consultant improvement advisors their schools improvement process is overseen and implemented by LA staff. Each is responsible for between 25-30 schools.

32. Round table meetings are performed similar to Wiltshire’s LASER meetings to identify schools which could potentially have issues that need to be addressed. Schools are not “banded” or “categorised” but are identified as having no concerns or some concern. They argued that this enabled the process to focus on the characteristics that made a school vulnerable, and to avoid any personal debates over what “band” a school should be in.

33. If a school is identified as requiring intervention, the default process was to implement the school improvement journey with a project group led by the responsible LA officer. If necessary the LA Officer can also commission external advisory or specialist support. They are also required to make judgements on the work’s impact and need for additional future support.

34. Unlike Wiltshire, Gloucestershire does not have a single Strategy Document but standardises the process through templates which school improvement project teams must follow. This is based on commonly used business and project
management procedures, and tools such as RACI and Gantt charts. They argued that apart from being good practice this was popular with Governors who are often familiar with these methods from their own workplaces.

35. The ultimate aim of the school improvement journey apart from rectifying areas of concern was to increase a school's autonomy as it progressed through the process, and consequently reduce the future need for LA involvement.

36. Officers in Gloucestershire noted that they were working towards a model where schools would be increasingly engaged in self-improvement and supporting each other. Schools were encouraged to assist each through partnership areas and the "GlosEd" website. It was recognised however that some schools appear to be cautious about helping schools with difficulties due to potential reputational worries. School-to-school help was described as particularly difficult for secondary schools where they were competing for the same pupils.

**Hampshire:**

37. Hampshire is a significantly larger local authority with 535 schools, and responsible for educating 2% of the UK’s children. As a proportion, significantly fewer schools had converted to academy status with only 40% of secondary schools making the change.

38. The basic philosophy underpinning Hampshire Council’s work was that all of Hampshire’s children and their education remained the responsibility of the local authority. As a consequence they had retained most of their LA education staff and advisory team. All subject advisors, with the exception of the Drama Advisor had been retained, as had 60 full time specialist inspectors. This meant that they were able to organise and run 917 professional development events in the past year.

39. In their view, because of the delay between cause and effect, the use of exam results were seen as inadequate and untimely indicators of emerging problems in a school. This necessitated the need for good early intelligence. They emphasised the importance of knowing their schools, and gathering soft data from annual advisory visits and professional development courses. They also stressed the need for intelligence to be supported by input from recruitment, finance, HR, and Governor Service teams. Good early intelligence pre-empted the need to be “chasing after Ofsted reports”.

40. District School Improvement Managers (SIM) act as line managers for school improvement work. Each is responsible for 50-70 schools with 8 covering 11 districts.

41. Statutory school improvement activities provided schools with 1 free day-long review visit a year from the schools allocated Leadership and Learning Partner (LLPR), who is a LA employee. Each LLPR visits about 25 schools. The 1 day review process is bespoke and formulated from known data and indicators, but
must include some compulsory elements such as “learning walks” in order to avoid being confined to the Head Teacher’s office.

42. The LLPR assesses the capacity of the school to improve and allocates LA resources. If further improvement activity is needed, discussions will take place on funding, although this is usually covered in equal measure by the school and the LA.

43. In their school improvement work Hampshire has stopped categorising the levels of risk in individual schools and using Ofsted terminology. This was in order to demonstrate that their role was to “help rather than inspect”.

44. The school improvement service was operated on a business model and traded service basis in order to provide financial viability. This model was stabilised by most schools signing up for a minimum three-year commitment. Hampshire’s school improvement services cost approximately £8 million, of this £2 million came directly from the LA with the rest funded by selling traded services and training.

45. Each advisor/inspector was expected to generate 170 days of paid income each year. Most of this came from schools commissioning additional work and from running professional development courses.

46. All Hampshire academies bought some kind of service from the LA, such as training courses.

47. Hampshire believes that the LA still has a key role to play in the school improvement process. This is because it retains the necessary ability and experience, and offers impartial expertise. They also have the necessary hard and soft data needed to inform the process. A “school-on-school intervention and improvement model” would not provide this.

Conclusions

48. The Wiltshire School Improvement Strategy is logical, methodical and presently fit for purpose given the existing statutory role of the LA, the financial situation and the present portfolio of maintained schools and academies in Wiltshire. It is thoroughly and clearly explained in the Wiltshire School improvement Strategy Document and this information is readily available to all our schools and academies.

49. The school improvement process is led and applied with expertise by LA Officers and the SIAs and WIA’s. This was verified by members whilst attending LASER meetings, a School Effectiveness Review, and through interviews with LA staff and SIAs and WIA’s.

50. At the LASER meetings the level of commitment, knowledge and intelligence displayed by the LA officers engaged in the system was of an exceptional standard. It was also reassuring to note the attendance of Corporate Director,
Cabinet Member and Portfolio Holder at those LASER meetings which conduct a more strategic review of the work.

51. Also the effectiveness of the Service is confirmed by outcomes. Over the past three years, 47 schools in Wiltshire have been assessed as “Requires Improvement” by OFSTED. Of the 40 schools in this cohort that received support from our School Improvement Service 29 (72.5%) were then assessed as “Good or Outstanding” at their next OFSTED inspection.

52. The present level of resource and staffing for the Service is minimal, particularly when compared to other LA’s such as Hampshire. However it is accepted that, given the present financial climate, the proposed changes in government policy and with over 92% of our school rated “good” or “outstanding”, it is unlikely that additional resources will be allocated to this work.

53. However, any further reduction in the resourcing of the Service will reduce its effectiveness. This is because the system is based on a regular visit regime from experienced and knowledgeable advisors who gather intelligence. The intelligence on individual schools is analysed by both advisors and officers in order to identify and act on early indicators of risk. As such, there is an overriding need to retain the level of knowledge and expertise currently provided by our officers and SIAs/WIAs, as the nature of school improvement work is particular to each individual school or academy. (Recommendation 1)

54. The use of serving and former Head teachers on a consultancy basis as SIAs and WIAs is a sensible and cost effective method of delivering the service and makes best use of expertise within the county. Also the present level of 3 half-day visits per year is preferable to the annual visit offered by many other LA’s, and should be retained. This results in early and timely interventions. (Recommendations 4&5)

55. The use of consultants for this crucial work does however increase the risk of variable performance. As such there is a continued need for a rigorous selection process and to provide thorough training, which is updated on a regular basis, and to have an effective performance management process. (Recommendation 6)

56. Although everything should be done to foster self-improvement within our schools and to encourage school-to-school support, there will always be a key role for an objective and experienced “third party”. This role is best performed by the LA, which has the necessary skill, resources, routines, and intelligence to identify and organise support. Other schools or MATs will not have the wider means or knowledge to effectively replicate this work.

57. There remains a high regard for Wiltshire School Improvement Service, as is evidenced by the fact that at present 179 of 235 schools continue to use it. This includes all of our maintained schools and 50% of primary academies. Also a survey conducted by the Schools and Local Authority Task Group in 2014 showed that 96% of schools and academies that presently used the service were likely, or very likely, to continue to use the service in future.
58. Given this need and level of regard for the present Service the preferred option moving forward, particularly given the proposed financial changes is that the Service be retained and provided as a traded-service. (Recommendations 1 & 2)

59. If this is not seen to be viable due to financial or other considerations, then other models for the maintenance of this Service should be considered, such as those operated in Hertfordshire or Kingston-on-Thames. They have established “not for profit school improvement companies” jointly owned by the LA and schools who have taken up shares or made financial contributions. In Hertfordshire “Herts for Learning” was established as a “schools company” and is owned 80:20 by local schools and the council respectively. (Recommendations 1 & 2)

60. At present the system is fit for purpose, given the current statutory duties, but as we move forward there will be a need to accommodate a new relationship with schools and academies. The academisation process and direct funding of schools will increase the level of competition from other providers. In these circumstances, and if the service moves to a traded basis, the present Wiltshire system of assessing and categorising risk into three tiers (with green, amber, and red RAG ratings) may be seen as too “top-down” and judgmental in a “traded-relationship” with schools. This could affect their decision to buy into the school improvement programme. In these circumstances the approach of Gloucestershire and Hampshire is preferable where they avoid placing schools into categories of risk, but simply consider each school on an individual basis. The application of this approach would emphasise one where the school is seen as a customer and receives a bespoke service. (Recommendation 8)

61. All the evidence received has led to the conclusion that a failure to offer our schools and academies an effective School Improvement Service is likely to have a detrimental impact on the quality of education in the County and that this will also negatively affect the LA’s education, economic and social objectives. As such, the ultimate aim must be to retain an effective school improvement service and to develop the present level of knowledge, experience and expertise presently “within the system”.

62. Further conclusions have been difficult to draw because of the changes and reversals in Government policy during the review period and the uncertainty over the transitional financial arrangements.

Proposal

63. To endorse the report of the Task Group and refer it to the Cabinet Member for Children’s Services for response at the Committee’s next meeting.

Recommendations

That the Cabinet Member for Children’s Services:
1. Retains an effective School Improvement Service without any further reduction in resource and offers this as part of a traded service.

2. Authorises necessary action so that this traded service is introduced promptly and in readiness for the budgetary changes.

3. Considers offering this service to schools on a three year contractual basis which would provide greater financial stability.

4. Retains the present use of Heads and Retired Heads on a consultancy basis as SIAs and WIA s as this makes best and cost effective use of current expertise and helps disseminate best practice.

5. Continues the programme that enables advisors to make 3 half-day visits each year to their allocated schools in order to ensure we are able to provide timely interventions and appropriate levels of support.

6. Reviews SIA /WIA training, assessment, and quality control, given the crucial nature of the advisors work and to ensure consistency and rigour.

7. Recommends that all schools in receipt of support from the School Improvement Service are routinely given the opportunity to provide feedback on the quality of that service.

8. In response to future changes reviews the present system in order to create a new relationship and culture in which schools are seen as customers and receive a bespoke service.

That the Children's Select Committee:

9. Adds a review of the strategy and support programme for disadvantaged learners to the forward work programme.

Cllr Philip Whalley, Chairman of the School Improvement Strategy Task Group

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Appendices

None

Background documents

None