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Dear Rachel

Children and Young People Scrutiny Review – Panel’s Follow-Up Response of Education Attainment Review and Recommendations

Thank you for your letter dated 16th July 2015, in response to my letter dated 20th April. I apologise for the delay in responding. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Panel for their further comments, some of which requested additional information, and which I will respond to below. My comments refer specifically to recommendations 2, 5, 6, 8, 9 and 12.

Recommendation 2

Write to the School’s Regional Commissioner requesting that:

- A) Academies and Academy sponsors be robustly challenged where they refuse to have any or very low contact with the local authority, to ensure they take their responsibilities seriously with regard to the local authority’s obligations and work it is undertaking to ensure strong educational attainment; and**
- B) Robustly challenge large Academy sponsors, where there is concern relating to attainment, and in such cases, review whether they should be allowed to accept additional schools into their provision/chain.**

Response provided 20th April 2015

Regularly meetings take place with the DfE and the School’s Commissioner. Information is shared with them, and they have been asked for risk assessments on all Academies in Doncaster, in line with the annual local authority risk assessments.

Comment/Action

It was felt by Panel Members that this response does not provide a clear indication as to whether the recommendation has been accepted or not, and if accepted how it will be implemented. The response has merely provided a summary of what is already in place. It is therefore requested that clarification be provided on whether it has been accepted or not, and if so, what is being actioned in addition to the above.

Response

The recommendation has been accepted, and we acknowledge that challenges to the Commissioner need to take place. Changes to the way of working now include involvement by Lord Nash, so concerns will also be reported to him when necessary.

Recommendation 5

Ensure, as much as is practical, there are minimal changes to the Local Authority education structure and continuity of staff and support.

Response provided 20th April 2015

The new structure is proving very successful, but is at risk due to the PPPR review and corporate challenges regarding the necessary restructures in the Access to Learning and Data Performance and Intelligence services. Centralising the data and intelligence work with schools and settings is at risk if major changes to service organisation dilute the expertise and remove the processes from the heart of services in Learning and Achievement. Funding is secure to maintain the overall Standards and Effectiveness team for a further year, but after that we must seek sustainable income sources to maintain the quality and effectiveness of the work we have delivered via the post-Ofsted action plan.

Comment/Action

In light of the issues raised within your response, Members have expressed concern about how the PPPR review and corporate challenges referred to will affect the new structure, which has been working very well. I would be therefore grateful for further information in response to our concerns, particularly regarding the stability of the funding in place, an issue which has been positively referred to within the letter following the focused school inspection in Doncaster.

Response

The Learning and Achievement Data and Intelligence Service has been left intact and exempt from the PPPR review for a period of 18 months, and then it will be reviewed with a view to absorbing into the PPPR structure. The service will however make contributions to the savings for the Council of £86,000 this year, and £55,000 next year.

Recommendation 6

Encourage local councillors to make contact with, and visit, schools within their wards, if not already undertaken.

Response provided 20th April 2015

The Cabinet Member is working with the services to examine the membership of all Governing Bodies, including Academies, and encourage Councillors to engage with school governance.

Comment/Action

To the Panel's knowledge there has been minimal or no confirmation of what has been done to encourage Councillors to engage with school governance. I would be grateful for an update on the response to this recommendation and for any correspondence that has been sent out to Members previously to be repeated and refreshed.

Response

The Cabinet member has verbally supported the challenge to Councillors to get involved in schools as governors. The importance of being a governor has been emphasised at Elected Member Training.

Recommendation 8

Investigate the numbers of families having to take their children to different schools across the borough, due to their preferred school being full, and how prolific the problem is.

Response provided 20th April 2015

Where there are pressures on school places, the local authority will seek to resolve the issues and have a strategic view of future school place planning needs.

Comment/For Action

Again, it has been thought that this response does not provide a clear indication as to whether this recommendation has been accepted or not, and if accepted, how it will be implemented. It is considered that the response only provides a broad outline of what would happen in this event of such pressures taking place. It is therefore requested that clarification be provided on whether this recommendation has been accepted or not, and if accepted, what exactly is being actioned to address this issue where relevant.

Response

The recommendation has been accepted and will be addressed by the Access to Learning Board in the Autumn. The Board will contain membership from all the appropriate partners within and beyond the Council to assist with more efficient place planning.

Recommendation 9

Consider the pooling of resources for support of children where English is a second language, and investigate how the resource can be increased to meet prospective high demand.

Response provided 20th April 2015

This will be considered by the Assistant Director and the Head of Service Learner Engagement to see how this can be developed.

Comment/For Action

Panel Members would like an update on whether this recommendation has been accepted or not, and if so, how it will be developed further to consideration by the Assistant Director and Head of Service, Learner Engagement.

Response

This recommendation has been accepted and a number of actions have progressed as a result. We are working positively across Learning & Opportunities Children & Young People (LOCYP), and Adults to pool resources between the Ethnic Minorities and Travellers Achievement Service (EMTAS) and Doncaster Translation Unit (DTU) to share language expertise. In addition, we continue to recruit into EMTAS to reflect the diversity of languages spoken in our schools and communities. This means we regularly recruit from and approach growing ethnic communities in the borough directly to ensure we have the right mix and balance of languages to give appropriate support to our schools, children and communities.

In addition, following negotiation with Human Resources, we have agreed to establish a “pool” of additional English as Another Language (EAL) speakers on flexible contracts. This pool will be utilised to meet immediate demands as they arise, and provide additional languages and dialects. We are also building engagement with the Gypsy Roma Traveller communities across Doncaster through the employment of two part-time outreach workers, whose work is already having a positive impact.

Recommendation 12

Investigate simplifying the direct payments scheme and ensure guidance for the transition of pupils requiring special educational needs is up to date with informative, easy to use guidance being made available.

Response provided 20th April 2015

Noted and will be considered by the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Teams and Finance.

Comment/For Action

Panel Members would like an update on whether this recommendation has been accepted or not, and if accepted, how it will be developed further to consideration by the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Teams and Finance.

Response

The Short Breaks Service has transferred to Commissioning and Opportunities. The recommendation is accepted and will be addressed as part of the service reform and changes to procedure. Members will be updated.

I trust the above is helpful, and thank the Panel for providing further comments.

Yours sincerely

Ros Jones
Mayor of Doncaster