

## **DfES 5 Year Strategy for Children and Learners**

### **Briefing Paper**

Attached is a presentation (Annex 1) which covers the main elements of the DfES 5 Year Strategy for Children and Learners, presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State on 8 July.

The following specific comments/issues for East Sussex have been explored through discussions at the Primary and Secondary Strategic Management Boards, at county headteachers' meetings and through the governors' consultative committees at area and county levels:

- 1) We should be taking a joined-up multiagency approach to some of the national PSA target areas – in particular relating to sport and obesity.
- 2) There are lots of positive aspects to the 5 Year Strategy, such as the additional investment in early years and childcare, and much which is not new. It is a very political document.
- 3) Much of the primary agenda set out in the 5 Year Strategy has been signalled previously and is generally positive. We are well placed to take advantage of the developing focus on sport and PE, through our network of Sports Colleges; the development of primary foreign languages will be a major challenge.
- 4) Proposals for guaranteed three year budgets and a dedicated Schools Budget fall short of the predicted total removal of schools' funding from Local Authorities. Consultation has been promised and the devil will be in the detail. On the face of it, as East Sussex has always fully passported the schools' budget, there may be limited impact other than the erosion of local determination of the formula for school funding. There are concerns, however, that potential changes in Standards Fund arrangements could significantly constrain central resources for school improvement, and the expectation that 'efficiency savings' will be made on schools' budgets raises the question of where and how these savings will be made. One possibility is that savings might be targeted on the centrally held schools' budget – which in large part is focused on special needs and support for children and families.
- 5) Proposals for all secondary schools to become specialist schools simply reflect the established direction in East Sussex – 21 of our 27 secondary schools have specialist status. Consideration could be given to a more strategic approach with schools to the development of second specialisms – perhaps on the basis of ensuring access to specialist expertise on a geographical or cluster basis. This is most obviously attractive in relation to modern foreign languages, given the need to develop primary languages provision.
- 6) Proposals to simplify the process for secondary schools to attain foundation status are a potential source of concern. There has been little interest from schools in recent years in a move to foundation status. Some may have been deterred by current requirements for extensive consultation and local decision making via the Schools Organisation Committee. It is far more likely, however, that the considerably increased responsibilities and accountability of governors and school managers and the lack of financial inducement (compared with that available to GM schools in the past) have reduced the appeal of this option.

There must be concern at proposals which remove local decision making (via SOC), and enable major public assets to be transferred to school governing bodies with varying skills and capacity on the basis of a simple vote and minimal consultation.

There are question marks over whether debts attached to assets – eg PFI for new builds – will be transferred to schools as new owners, as well as issues relating to insurance, human resources, etc. Nationally, the implications for BSF are beginning to emerge.

Perhaps the greatest area of concern, however, relates to admissions arrangements and the potential impact on national and local strategies to enhance inclusion and provide excellence and equity for all pupils (see 10 below).

I understand the Specialist School Trust will be encouraging all specialist schools to adopt foundation status and so they will be subject to some pressure to consider it.

- 7) The Strategy proposes a fast track process to speed up the expansion of popular schools. There are also measures to encourage a range of promoters of new schools, and to establish 200 Academies by 2010.

Concerns about the adoption of a market approach to the provision of school places have been well rehearsed over the years, including issues of best value and potential negative impact on other community schools. It is not clear what level of capital resourcing will be available to support schools wishing to expand.

The proposed expansion of Academies raises issues related to the degree of influence accorded to sponsors who typically invest £2-3m against £25-30m investment from the public purse. More importantly, there are also significant issues relating to admissions arrangements (see 10 below).

- 8) The 'new relationship with schools' envisaged by the strategy document will replace LEA link or contact advisers for secondary schools with 'school improvement partners' (SIPs) who, it is envisaged, will be serving heads from existing schools. Although the Strategy asserts that the SIPs will be employed by LEAs, there is still some uncertainty about whether they will have some direct accountability to a regional or sub-regional manager. Given that the SIPs will have a crucial role in agreeing levels of support, intervention, etc with schools, any line management accountability to a regional manager would, in my view, undermine the accountability of the Director of Education for school standards. There is a lack of clarity about funding for the SIPs, and some scepticism about how many serving headteachers will be willing to adopt a challenge role in relation to other headteacher colleagues. Discussion with East Sussex secondary heads earlier in the year suggested they could see little benefit in the proposals and were concerned that they might damage existing partnerships and arrangements. Although the Government clearly has considerable concerns about the secondary school sector, and sees empowering school leaders as part of the solution, there is a danger that rewriting the LEA role will exacerbate, not solve the problems. According to last year's HMI report *'School improvement is now the most consistently satisfactory area of LEA work, some thing which was certainly not true a few years ago. Many factors influence the standards pupils achieve: the pupils themselves and the circumstances in which they live, the quality of teaching provided by the school, the support of parents and the community and the policies pursued by central government are amongst them. However, as last year, rapidly improving management of school improvement services, allied to a clearer definition of their role, was a major factor in bringing about the improvement noted.'*
- 9) In relation to 14-19 developments a range of initiatives are flagged in the Strategy although the final Tomlinson Report is still awaited. The document talks about higher standards and greater choice of sixth form and vocational provision. The presumption in favour of approving bids from successful 11-16 schools for new sixth forms is strengthened. *'In areas where fewer than 20 percent of schools have sixth forms, high-performing specialist schools that want sixth forms will be able to make proposals to local decision – makers either for freestanding sixth forms or for collaborative provision –for example, new sixth form colleges in which schools have a direct stake in the teaching and management. Such proposals will be*

*considered on a fast track basis, with a strong presumption that they are approved unless there are exceptional circumstances, and we will set up a single capital budget for new 16-19 provision. We will also make this strong presumption for approval where participation or achievement at 16-19 is low...’.*

It remains to be seen how the publication of the Strategy will impact on the consideration of the Hastings and Rother post 16 proposals by the Secretary of State.

- 10) The creation of ‘independent specialist schools’ through encouragement of foundation status, proposals to enable popular schools to expand and the expansion of Academies could have a significant impact on admissions arrangements, with individual governing bodies increasingly being their own admissions authority. Although the Strategy talks about co-ordinated admissions arrangements we know from experience in neighbouring authorities that these do not always produce satisfactory outcomes for children and their parents. The Parliamentary Select Committee on Education and Skills recently produced a highly critical report on admissions arrangements and argued strongly for stronger regulation to ensure social inclusion and equity. In a major speech on 18 November Charles Clarke set out proposals for an enhanced role for School Admissions Fora in developing local protocols to ensure all schools accept a fair proportion of hard to place pupils. Potentially, this is a positive step towards a local accountability framework within which admissions can be managed on an equitable basis.
- 11) There are many references in the Strategy to expectations on schools in relation to the policy aims of the earlier “Every Child Matters” document and the Children Act. Encouragement is given to the development of “extended” and “full service extended” schools, in particular, not least as a contribution to the development of more childcare for school age children but also as a way of increasing access to services for children and the wider community. We need to consider our approach to the possibility of developing 8.00 to 6.00 provision in some primary schools. There are also many other implications for schools in the children’s services reform agenda, for example in the recent consultation document on a new approach to assessing the needs of vulnerable children and young people (“Common assessment framework”). Our proposals for local school and service partnerships are designed to help schools manage this developing agenda.
- 12) On special needs the Strategy cross refers to the earlier strategy document “Removing Barriers to Achievement” which does, of course, have significant implications for all schools. We have been carrying out our own review, with the full involvement of special schools and representative mainstream schools, of the way we use resources for specialist SEN provision, and we need to consider together what steps we should take in the light of that work.
- 13) Overall, a ‘modernised’ role for Local Education Authorities is envisaged in the Strategy, based on advocacy for parents and children, strategic leadership, QA and commissioning. The document clearly sees authorities retaining a role in relation to capital strategy, school place planning, admissions, transport and SEN. The position on school improvement is more ambivalent. It is suggested that the removal of school budgets will allow local authorities to concentrate on ‘their strategic and quality-assuring functions’. It remains to be seen how ‘strategic’ local authorities can be in light of proposals described above relating to school finance, admissions, school place planning and capital investment. The fact that schools are not named on the face of the Children Act and, therefore, will not be placed under a duty to co-operate in partnership arrangements to improve the well-being of children, highlights the tension between overall Government objectives in relation to social inclusion/children’s services which rely on collaboration and partnership and the promotion of greater independence and autonomy for secondary schools. One likely result of this will be to increase the role of inspection regimes in securing compliance.