

Committee: **Cabinet**

Date: **15 December 2004**

Title of Report: **The Government's Five Year Strategy for Education**

By: **Director of Education and Libraries**

Purpose of Report: **To inform the Cabinet of issues arising from the Government's Five Year Strategy for Education, and to seek approval for draft responses to consultation papers from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) on foundation schools, the expansion of popular and successful schools and adding new sixth forms.**

Recommendation:

The Cabinet is recommended to note the issues identified in the commentary on the Five Year Strategy (Appendix A) and to approve the draft responses to the DfES consultation papers (Appendices B and C)

1. Financial Appraisal

1.1 The Five Year Strategy includes proposals for improvement in education and services to children which will need to be managed within the overall resources available for these services. The proposals for three year budgets for schools and a dedicated Schools Budget may place constraints on the Council's future capacity to manage its budget whilst maintaining the quality of central support services.

1.2 Any proposals to expand popular and successful schools or add new sixth forms would be likely to result in new pressures on the capital programme, which may not be in accordance with the priorities identified in the Education Asset Management Plan. The Strategy includes a proposal that responsibility for capital funding of school sixth forms should transfer to the Learning and Skills Council (LSC).

2. Supporting Information

2.1 The Secretary of State for Education and Skills presented the Government's Five Year Strategy to Parliament on 8 July. The Strategy sets out the Government's plans for further reform of the education service for the next five years. In the primary sector, the proposals largely take forward the existing primary strategy, derived from Excellence and Enjoyment. The proposals for the secondary sector are more wide ranging, and have the aim of developing further diversity in the sector, through the creation of more specialist schools, more schools securing foundation status and the development of a greater number of Academies. The Government believes that greater freedom and autonomy in the secondary sector will contribute to higher standards, and that foundation status in particular will give schools opportunities to realise their aspirations which they may not otherwise have. At the same time, the Strategy envisages continuing closer collaboration between schools.

2.2 The Strategy maintains a continuing important role for local authorities, in respect of strategic planning, support for school improvement (although there is some ambivalence on this), and support for individual pupils and families in areas such as special educational needs, admissions and education welfare. The Strategy recognises that authorities will be developing more comprehensive and coherent support for children and families through their plans for Children's Services.

2.3 Appendix A sets out the key issues for East Sussex arising from the Strategy. Versions of this paper have been used as a basis for discussion with headteachers, governors and officer groups over the last five months. Many of the proposals in the strategy have been broadly welcomed as an extension of improvement work which is already occurring. There has been support from secondary schools for the further strategic development of specialist status across the county through the development of second

specialisms. There has been very little expressed interest among the secondary schools in transferring to foundation status, although two schools have indicated an intention to investigate the matter further.

2.4 In October, the DfES issued two consultation papers, copies of which have been placed in the Members' Room. The first sets out proposals to streamline and speed up the process for secondary schools of applying for foundation status. These proposals remove any requirement for consultation prior to the publication of proposals, and transfer decision making from the School Organisation Committee (SOC) to the governing body making the proposal. There must be concern at proposals which remove local decision making (via the 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.

2.5 The second consultation paper sets out procedures for 'popular and successful' schools to apply to expand, and for 'high performing specialist schools' to apply to add a sixth form. Neither of these proposals is wrong in principle. The proposals do not however pay sufficient attention to the strategic issues arising from them in relation, for example, to improvement for all schools and opportunities for all pupils and students.

2.6 Both consultation papers are disappointing in their lack of detail and their scant consideration of the wider implications of what is proposed. It would have been helpful to have received more detail of the guidance it is proposed to issue to governing bodies to help them formulate and implement proposals. In general terms, it is a matter of considerable concern that the proposals tend to have the effect of closing down local debate and participation in decision making. This is unlikely to contribute positively to the further development of partnership and collaboration between schools.

2.7 The DfES has requested responses to the two consultation papers by 31 December. Draft responses are attached as Appendices B and C.

3. Conclusion and Reason for Recommendation

3.1 The Five Year Strategy has many positive aspects which will assist schools and the authority in taking forward our commitment to school improvement and raised standards. Concern should be expressed, however, about those aspects of the Strategy which may tend to harm the increasing partnership and collaboration between schools. Of particular concern is the tendency in the proposals for change of status, expansion and the addition of sixth forms to close down debate and local decision making on changes which could have wide implications for standards, school improvement and strategic planning of resources. The Cabinet is recommended to note the issues identified in this report, and to approve the draft responses to consultation (Appendices B and C), as these must be submitted to the DfES by 31 December.

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