

Committee: **Lead Members for Children’s Services**

Date: **18 June 2013**

Title of Report: **Peer Challenge Update**

By: **Interim Director of Children’s Services**

Purpose of Report: **To update the Lead Member on the follow up to the Peer Challenge by officers from Kent County Council.**

Recommendation:

The Lead Members are recommended to note the progress made to date in addressing the recommendations arising from the Peer Challenge.

1. Financial Appraisal

1.1. Any costs that have arisen as a result of the work outlined in this paper have been met within the existing Standards and Learning Effectiveness Service’s budget.

2. Supporting information

2.1. East Sussex County Council invited the Peer Challenge, which took place on 20 and 21 March 2012 and was conducted by senior Officers from Kent, Hampshire, Portsmouth and Medway. The Peer Challenge looked at:

- The effectiveness of strategies to improve performance at Key Stage 2.
- The pace of improvement in schools and the challenge provided by the Local Authority (LA) in order to bring about school improvement.
- Whether the LA is sufficiently explicit about its role, its aspirations and priorities and the model for school improvement, as well as its expectations of schools.
- The LA’s knowledge of its schools to enable it to carry out its strategic role in developing a school to school support system.

2.2. A number of areas for consideration were flagged in the report and, on 6 March 2013, a follow up visit was arranged with the Director of Children’s Services and the Head of School Improvement from Kent County Council. The report of this visit is attached at Appendix 1 and it shows that, since the original Peer Challenge, there has been a strategic shift in approach by East Sussex and good progress has been achieved in a number of areas. In particular, the review recognised the progress we had made in:

- Gaining greater knowledge of our schools through the External Adviser programme for small schools, which was based on the one already in place for special schools.
- Improved communication with schools.
- The development and communication of the Proposition For Partnership.
- The work in establishing alliances to provide a starting point for school to school support.
- The impact of the Securing Good programme for “Requires Improvement” schools.

- Our early intervention work with Early Years including the Nursery Project and Village Project.

2.3. During the visit, we discussed ways in which Kent are working with their schools and have since visited with consultants in Kent to have wider discussions. As a result we are about to run a programme called 'Every Lesson Counts', a targeted programme for teachers aimed at improving the quality of teaching.

2.4. The report also flagged some further areas for consideration and work is also already underway to address these. :

- *The report said that we need to be more explicit about the strategic approach in East Sussex and the expectations for changing the system to include more school to school support.*

We have been delivering this message clearly to Governors at the Governors' Area Meetings in Terms 5 and 6, and similar communications are planned for the Head Teachers Forums.

- *The report also indicated that we needed to develop our alliances of schools into more advanced partnerships, with more formal arrangements for securing improvement and shared accountability.*

We are working with alliances to develop more accountability and are currently developing data dashboards for Alliances which will enable them to look at their performance as if they were one school. We are piloting a programme for Chairs of Governors of schools in alliances to enable them to develop their joint vision for school to school support and to find ways of jointly planning for improvement. This programme will include an element of governing body peer review, based on work that has been piloted in Medway.

3. Conclusion and Reason for Recommendations

3.1. The Lead Member is recommended to note the progress made to date in addressing the recommendations of the original Peer Challenge and to note the areas for consideration in the report of the follow up visit, together with the work already being undertaken to move forward.

Ged Rowney

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Local Member(s): All

Background Documents: None

Appendix 1 - Follow up report

**East Sussex Peer Challenge Follow Up Visit
6 March 2013**

Introduction

Following the Peer Challenge visit in 2012 which focused on the school improvement strategy for Primary education, a follow up visit was arranged on 6 March 2013 to review progress on the key issues for development.

The local authority had developed its partnership with schools, developed a more strategic approach to school to school support and was working in a more focused and targeted way with schools requiring improvement. During the visit we spoke to headteachers and local authority officers and reviewed a helpful range of documentation which provided clear evidence of improvement.

Progress since 2012

It is clear that there has been a strategic shift in approach by the local authority and good progress has been achieved in a number of areas. Noticeable improvements have taken place in:

- The categorisation of schools and the quality of school self evaluation. It is a strength that there are usually accurate and agreed judgements between the LA and schools about their current levels of performance.
- The use of data and the effectiveness of assessment in schools to track pupil progress and analyse performance trends. This is helping to increase the pace of improvement in a number of schools.
- The development of school alliances which is already showing evidence of effective school to school support, and more sustainable models of school improvement. The cross phase alliances were proving to be particularly effective in some areas.
- The impact of targeted work with schools requiring improvement, evidenced by a good rate of improved inspection outcomes.
- The local authority having a clearer agenda and more open partnership with schools. Headteachers commented that the local authority had moved to a more 'listening' mode and was making better use of the capacity in good and outstanding schools to support other schools.
- The experience of schools was more joined up in the way the authority provides a better coordinated approach to support and challenge.

- The local authority had developed its work with governors in reviewing and challenging schools to improve, with more robust plans and regular reviews to monitor progress.
- The local authority continues to develop its effective improvement programmes for schools, which are valued and have clear impact. These provide a stronger focus on the quality of teaching and learning and help to set higher expectations for a more rapid rate of improvement in teaching quality.
- The Proposition for Partnership document had helped to set a clearer agenda and signal a stronger commitment to school collaboration and partnership, helped by the additional funding for the development of school alliances.

Areas for Consideration and Next Steps

While much progress has been achieved there is scope to increase the pace of development and be more explicit about what is expected of school alliances. The authority recognises that this is work in progress and only a small number of alliances are yet showing the maturity and depth to provide sustainable school improvement. An increase in pace could be achieved by:

- Setting out a route map whereby alliances could plot their development to more advanced and systematic partnerships, with more formal arrangements for securing improvement and having shared accountability across the group of schools.
- Developing ways to collect data and evaluate progress on the impact of school alliances on improving school standards, the quality of teaching and the effectiveness of leadership and management.
- Sharing examples of the most effective alliances and encouraging alliances to share their experiences of developing an effective partnership.
- Developing the Proposition for Partnership document further to be more explicit about the strategic approach in East Sussex and the expectations for changing the system to a more school to school support system. This could include the more active promotion of a more mixed economy, of academies, chains, federations, trusts and other more formal alliance partnership agreements.
- Ensuring school alliances set challenging improvement targets and commit to achieving rapid improvement goals for each partnership of schools. A stronger focus on improving all teaching and learning to good would be a core commitment.

- Developing the scope for school alliance models to do more, to take responsibility for and deliver more local authority activities on a devolved basis, such as behaviour partnerships, early help for vulnerable groups, and specialist support for pupils with special educational needs.
- Using the school alliance strategy to build capacity quickly for school leadership and management, and ensure more continuity of leadership across more than one school.
- Developing the involvement of Special schools in the school alliance strategy and build more effective outreach between special and mainstream schools.
- Considering further use of the available funding to invest in more thematic developments or specialisms among groups of schools, who could become centres of excellence for some aspects of school improvement.
- Ensuring the alliance strategy continues to be supported and brokered by a robust LA school improvement strategy which can deliver appropriate external challenge and support in inverse proportion to schools' success and the success of each alliance.
- Using the alliance model to develop more teaching school models for improvement across the county.
- Aiming to have all schools in a well developed alliance by the end of 2013.

Conclusion

The local authority has made good progress and has set out a clearer strategic direction for school improvement, which it now recognises can go forward with increased pace and scope.

It has been a privilege to work with colleagues in East Sussex on this key aspect of the local authority's role and we would be keen to continue to share practice and strategies as Kent also develops its approaches to a more sustainable school to school support system.

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Kent County Council