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Learning and Skills Scrutiny Committee Friday, 26 April 2019

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE LEARNING AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD AT COUNCIL CHAMBER, COUNTY HALL - COUNTY HALL ON FRIDAY, 26 APRIL 2019

PRESENT

County Councillor A Davies (Chair)

County Councillors G Breeze, D R Jones, E Roderick, L Roberts, P Roberts and
R G Thomas,
Parent Governor Representative: S. Davies and G Robson
Church Representative: M Evitts

In attendance:

County Councillor M Alexander (Portfolio Holder for Learning and Welsh
Language), E Towns (Senior Challenge Advisor), L Lovell (Senior Challenge
Advisor) and E Patterson (Scrutiny Officer).

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from County Councillors B Davies and S
Davies and Dr A Clark (Head of Schools). County Councillor P Roberts
apologised for his late arrival joining the meeting at 11.00am.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

3. DECLARATIONS OF PARTY WHIP

No declarations of party whip were received.

4. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 28th March 2019 will be approved at the next
meeting of committee.

5. CATEGORISATION

The Senior Challenge Advisors presented a report on the national categorisation
of Powys schools (copy attached with signed minutes).

Categorisation is a national two stage process whereby schools are assessed by
Challenge Advisors using 17 criteria to assess their capacity to improve and are
placed into one of four categories. A and B schools can demonstrate an ability to
self-improve, C and D schools need additional support to improve. The second
stage indicates how many days support a school needs to improve and is
banded as follows:

Green	- 4 days support
Yellow	- 10 days support
Amber	- 15 days support

Red - 25 days support

Nationally there has been a focus on the colour of categorised schools with red schools perceived as poor rather than schools that need additional support.

Overall there has been an increase in schools most able to self-improve from 31 to 34 schools (36%) and there is the highest number of schools in the category A and B (71%). There are then fewer schools in category C and D with 3 schools in category D.

There has been more improvement in the primary sector than the secondary sector.

There are 16 schools in category C of which there are 11 with a new or acting head. Any school with a new or acting head is immediately assessed as need an additional 10 days of support which places it in the amber category.

The Portfolio Holder observed that this demonstrated a weakness where an excellent school may have new or acting head teacher and be reported as amber which is not publicly perceived positively which is quite different from a school that is struggling.

Does the schools service know which position the amber schools in Powys are?
Yes. It is necessary to provide additional support to new and acting head teachers to secure leadership.

Can scrutiny be provided with information regarding the movement of schools between categories?
This can be provided.

The Portfolio Holder observed that within the category of self-improving schools there were some that were easier to manage than others. The School Organisation Policy expects head teachers to be heads of more than one school so that their skills can be shared across more schools.

The Senior Challenge Advisor confirmed that Powys has the highest amount of new and acting heads across the ERW region (for example Swansea and Neath Port Talbot areas have no executive or acting head teachers) however, there have been a number of Powys head teachers successfully completing their NPQH this year and therefore the picture may look different next year. There is an area divide with schools in south Powys having multiple applicants for headships but some schools in north Powys having no applicants at all. Overall there are more amber schools in north Powys. The requirement in Wales for head teachers to have the NPQH is a particular problem in Powys where as it is not possible to attract from across the long border with England. To overcome this the authority are working with ERW to train middle leaders and effectively 'grow our own'.

The Portfolio Holder noted that the School Organisation Policy assisted with this process with classroom teachers having an opportunity to progress to site managers before taking on head teacher roles.

Are the levels of new and acting head teachers known across Wales?

The information is known for ERW but not in the other three regions. There is a debate across Wales regarding shared and executive heads. ERW is co-ordinating discussion with all shared heads across the region which will help inform the debate across Wales. There is strong representation from Powys as this authority has a number of shared heads.

How many teachers are undertaking middle leadership training?

Approximately 20 per year have accessed this training and over the last 3 years there have been around 60 trained. Some of these cohorts go on to access further training and 11 have since been assessed for the NPQH. These trainees have not on the whole left the authority.

The Senior Challenge Advisor noted that the Schools service are able to react immediately to in year changes and whilst the national categorisation is only published annually there will effectively be in year changes as schools are identified as needing more or different support. For example if a head teacher has a period of long term absence then the school will require a considerable amount of additional support.

Is it the case that schools and Governing Bodies understand national categorisation? May it be the case that schools and Governing Bodies fight against a category professionally recommended by a Challenge Advisor as they wish to be in a higher colour category when really they need the recommended level of support?

This appears to be the case and runs right through the system from schools and Governing Bodies to Welsh Government who publicise how many schools for example are in the 'red' category. The perception is therefore not about how many days support a school needs. The hardest conversations are those where it is recommended a school needs to move down a category.

In this respect there are examples where pupils have moved to schools in Shropshire when national categorisation has identified that the school needs additional support ie has dropped a category.

ERW has lobbied Welsh Government regarding the problems associated with the colours assigned to categorisation and Welsh Government recognise that these result in behaviours which are inappropriate (for example head teachers turning down support).

The Portfolio Holder noted that the Minister understood the issue but needed to proceed with care to ensure that any changes were not perceived as backpedalling on standards.

Recommended that:

- 1. the authority press for a change in the way that national categorisation is presented to emphasis the support a school needs rather than showing this as a colour.**
- 2. That the Chair and Portfolio Holder jointly agree the terms in which this will be expressed**

How does the service know that schools are being correctly categorised in Powys?

The process is that Challenge Advisors are assigned a number of schools. In the autumn term Core Visits are undertaken where categorisation takes place.

All reports are quality assured by Senior Challenge Advisors. A sample of these are taken to ERW for moderation regionally (to include one from each Challenge Advisor across the region) and then samples from each of the four regions are taken for national moderation. It is confirmed that no categorisations from Powys Challenge Advisors have been challenged. However, there cannot be complete confidence that Estyn will come to the same conclusions as the Challenge Advisor as the categorisation assessment is undertaken by one person over one day whilst an Estyn inspection is undertaken over a period of three days by multiple people.

Can a school jump a category?

Exceptionally this can happen.

Once schools have been categorised and given an agreed level of support how does the authority evidence that this support is having the expected impact?

All of the days support provided are logged with notes of what happened and what are the next steps to be taken. Amber and Red schools receive half termly visits from their challenge advisors from which reports are sent to the Senior Challenge Advisors identifying what improvements are being made.

Are all schools receptive to advice?

In most cases schools are receptive to advice. There are six schools who have been in Amber for three years. Four are there due to acting headteacher or Estyn categorisation and two schools have been identified as 'coasting'. They have been receiving a high level of support for three years with only satisfactory progress made in addressing school improvement priorities.

What further action is taken?

Two of the Amber schools have been called in to a School causing concern meeting with the Head of Schools. If this action does not result in improvements, then the next stage would be to issue a warning letter or to provide additional support.

Has the authority left the situation for too long?

It would be expected that a school would be in Amber for two years but improvements would be seen in the third year.

When do you expect these Amber schools to improve?

One of the schools came into the meeting at County Hall and are rising to the challenge to improve. The other school came into County Hall arguing that they should not have been placed in the Amber category.

How can the schools service be assured that the support that is provided is good enough and is providing value for money?

The support provided is bespoke for each school. The Challenge Advisor is the gatekeeper and receives a report on the support delivered from the provider. At the half termly visits the Challenge Advisor checks the impact of the support provided in relation to the school's priorities. All Challenge Advisors are trained Estyn Inspectors. They constantly review support and impact.

Can additional data be provided to help track improvements over time?

Across Powys 29 schools have remained in the same category.

Is there confidence that pupils education in Powys is good enough?

In nearly all schools this is the case except those schools that are coasting and those which are in categories which need to improve. It is important to celebrate those schools that are doing really well.

County Councillor P Roberts arrives 11.00am

What action is being taken to ensure that all pupils receive a good education as children only get one opportunity at their school career? It is unfair on those children who are not receiving a good education.

The Portfolio Holder advised that there are two sides to this. In part there is an element of luck but this can be minimised by schools working well together. Green schools should be sharing their strengths. The authority need to be firm regarding leadership and governance as there is no desire to be in a position where it is necessary to call schools in.

The Senior Challenge Advisor noted that the schools service had received notice from Estyn that an Inspection would take place between the 1st and 5th July 2019.

6	CHAIR'S BRIEFING
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This item was deferred.

7	WORK PROGRAMME
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The work programme was noted.

Parent Governor Angela Davies (Chair)

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