

ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO CABINET

1.	Meeting:	Cabinet
2.	Date:	6th April, 2011
3.	Title:	Sustaining School Improvement in Rotherham from April 2011
4.	Directorate:	Children and Young People's Services: School Effectiveness Service

5. **Summary**

The Local Authority is working intensively with Rotherham schools to design and deliver a new 'school improvement partnership' with effect from April 2011. At that point, fundamental shifts in government policy on schools and local education provision will combine with stringent financial cuts to Local Authorities to make current practice unsustainable. We will need to establish a new settlement with schools and new approaches to individual and collective school improvement to ensure our children and young people continue to progress as they should. This proposed partnership builds on the considerable successes of Transforming Rotherham Learning (TRL) over the last five years but will require a step-change in system leadership, support structures and resourcing to be effective.

6. **Recommendations**

- **That Cabinet endorse the proposals for a new Rotherham school improvement partnership.**
- **That Cabinet request a further report on the new proposed governance structures.**
- **That Cabinet seek to enter into a minimum of a two-year agreement with the Partnership, ensuring a period of relative stability with the new governance arrangements.**

7. Proposals and Details

The coalition government has published a White Paper, 'The Importance of Teaching', (December 2010), which promises an unprecedented change in national education policy and provision at local level across Local Authorities and schools. Many of the cornerstones of previous government policy over twenty years are rapidly being dismantled and the funding streams which supported them significantly reduced or terminated. Particularly significant is the disappearance of the National Strategies apparatus and the extensive loss of employment in the workforce dependent on it. Other considerable national programmes have been cancelled and funding to support Local Authority school improvement teams severely reduced. The previously dominant model, therefore, of Local Authority support to local schools through a central workforce is no longer sustainable, even if it were to be desirable.

In its place, government anticipates a free market of school improvement support, determined and funded by schools themselves to meet their specific needs, and provided by strong schools (Academies, Outstanding schools, Academy chains), locally and nationally accredited lead Headteachers (National Leaders of Education: NLE – Local Leaders: LLE) and commercial organisations. Local Authorities may well retain responsibility for their most vulnerable schools (Ofsted categories, below or close to KS2/ GCSE floor targets) and may choose to operate in the commercial market but their near monopoly on the supply of 'school improvement' will be broken and their influence on local schools potentially much weakened unless they adapt - and adapt quickly.

Government is actively dismantling familiar systems and deliberately challenging established cultures and expectations. Its aspiration is that every school becomes an Academy and it will use Free Schools and Training Schools to disturb and redraw local landscapes. Funding mechanisms which bypass Councils will increase the financial power of schools in a competitive school improvement market and further reduce the capacity and influence of Local Authorities. Schools choosing to become Academies take significant sums out of the collective Local Authority budget, threatening local government employment and the capacity of the Local Authority to sustain strategic activity, notably in areas of high vulnerability, such as Special Educational Needs. However, the Local Authority is in no position to obstruct schools seeking Academy or Trust status and should not try to: the real issue is the behaviour of schools and the quality of their contribution not their titles.

Extensive discussions with Headteachers and Chairs/Vice Chairs of Governors since summer 2010 have confirmed that educational leaders in Rotherham want to work collectively for a different future where schools enjoy the 'freedoms' offered by the coalition government but within a sustained collaborative approach informed by the TRL core values and collective mission. For example, the 3 secondary Academies have all reaffirmed their commitment to TRL and continue to behave as genuine partners in that endeavour. Schools overwhelmingly wish to exercise their new powers responsibly on behalf of all learners, not 'go it alone' or 'opt out' of the Rotherham professional community. There are exciting opportunities here to sustain the gains of the last five years in Rotherham and ensure the goals of TRL remain achievable despite the shifts in national policy.

What this requires is a fundamentally new settlement and relationship between schools and the Local Authority which recognises the changes required by national government but integrates them into the local professional culture which is markedly different from that in most other Local Authorities. Such a settlement will be based on partnerships in Learning Communities 0-19, which are Headteacher led and supported by a smaller but still valued Local Authority. School improvement energy, expertise and resources will increasingly be provided by lead schools and Headteachers rather than a central School Effectiveness Service team. Headteachers and other leaders, working through representative structures, will take responsibility for commissioning school support, financing it and evaluating its impact.

The governance of this activity is critical because it must model the relationships, leadership and accountability which underpin it. A 'Transforming Rotherham Learning Partnership Executive' would combine the functions of the current TRL Executive (which authorises the Partnership Plan and commissions work in Leadership, Inclusion and Learning) with new responsibilities appropriate to the changed environment. This body would be closely connected, through Headteacher representation to both the Schools' Forum (which contracts use of the Dedicated Schools Grant within the Local Authority) and the new School Improvement Partnership. Policy and financial governance would, therefore, be invested in a single body made up primarily of school leaders, using the Schools Forum constitution as a legal core. There is the potential to develop such an organisation into a formal Trust, if desired/needed, but it would begin in the voluntary contracting of schools and the LA around the core TRL values, the deployment of the central workforce and school change-makers to improve Standards and the investment of the funding made available to the Partnership from the DSG, school budgets and government grants (notably the new 'Endowment Fund').

Two Working Parties, Primary/Special and Special/Secondary have met several times with the support of Consultant Headteachers. The groups will come together to produce a joint proposal that will go to all Heads and Governors and to the CYPs Strategic Director and Cabinet. The proposal will be underpinned by the TRL principles and a clear Mission Statement:

Any emerging partnership must be more effective and successful in promoting the outcomes of all children and young people and will need to address underperformance, particularly in KS2, and the variable standards in the secondary phase. The Local Authority is determined to improve its practice to support Heads and Governors in our joint commitment to accelerate progress. In summary, the partnership will be tested against its ability to accelerate progress at a series of levels:

- all students making at least good progress
- no underperforming cohorts
- all teachers delivering at least good learning and
- all schools moving to at least the next level of successful performance

The Partnership would place a Teaching School structure at the heart of the school improvement strategy. Discussions have already begun across primary, special and the secondary school, Wickersley, that meet the exacting criteria for Teaching

School status with the ambition of submitting a cross-phase partnership bid in April 2011. The Partnership could adopt the principles of a Social Enterprise organisation without the bureaucracy of more formal entities. Representation would be based on Learning Communities and embrace other partners crucial to the shared endeavour e.g. 14-19, P&V Providers 0-3. There would be the potential to market services beyond Rotherham's borders: examples of this already exist and the monies generated would increase the collective resource to promote local capacity and sustainability.

In summary, then, the Partnership proposal is designed to:

- i. ensure the sustainability of the TRL mission in the new political and financial context
- ii. recognise school leaders' aspirations to combine individual freedoms with a strong collaborative culture
- iii. mobilise the expertise of strong schools and school leaders on behalf of the whole community, especially the most vulnerable
- iv. secure continued local control over the Rotherham agenda
- v. sustain the relevance of the LA as a partner in provision for children and young people, albeit in a more 'junior' role

Within this new settlement, the role of a smaller but high quality SES will be to:

- i. manage a challenging transition period between the old world of school improvement and the new, retaining Headteachers' confidence in a period of unprecedented disturbance
- ii. support the most vulnerable schools, not least those in Ofsted categories
- iii. champion the progress and wellbeing of the most vulnerable learners across the local system
- iv. build the capacity of the new leaders of school improvement, through targeted professional development and the brokering of networks and collaborations
- v. broker entrepreneurial activity beyond Rotherham in the sub-region and beyond
- vi. ensure the alignment of the new school improvement profile with broader CYPS and RMBC priorities

8. **Risks and Uncertainties:**

If the LA and schools fail to establish a new settlement, the risks of damage to local provision are fundamental and urgent. They include

- i. an increase in schools electing to become Academies, including in the Primary and Special phases
- ii. atomisation of the local system where schools choose to 'go it alone', competing for resources and position

- iii. significant reductions in the DSG and, therefore, the capacity to operate collectively, if Academies and Trusts increase
- iv. commercial activity by external providers – private companies and Academy chains – working to their own agendas in Rotherham
- v. a breakdown in relationships – in effect, the end of the local school system serving the local community

9. **Finance**

Funding for LAs and schools remains unclear until both budgets are confirmed later this term. What is already evident is that the Local Authority's capacity to support local school improvement will be significantly reduced by losses from revenue and grant funding and staffing; much of that responsibility will, therefore, pass to schools who, it is promised, will have sufficient resources to purchase support. Schools may be persuaded to contribute to a collective Partnership budget to secure services of the quality and range they require; there are precedents for this within and beyond the SLA model. Heads are currently working with the Local Authority to review the DSG which has earmarked £750,000 funding for Partnership activity. Government is currently out to tender on management of an 'Endowment Fund' (£110m initially) to resource innovative school improvement practice, to which we intend to bid. Creating the collective capital to fund local school-led improvement activity will be vital to the improvement of Standards and in ensuring Rotherham is not to become the playground of Academy chains and commercial predators.

10. **Policy and Performance Agenda Implications**

This is, in essence, a fundamental redefinition of school/Local Authority relationships with significant shifts in power, responsibility and accountability. These will need to be fully explored and secured as the Partnership is built. However, the voluntary nature of the endeavour and its organic development will allow that exploration to occur before commitments on each side become irreversible.

This may well demand an apparent surrender of Local Authority power to collaborative structures but is the only way to secure continued relevance and respect. Headteachers will expect any future financial model to be independent of the LA and be governed within the Partnership system. That is crucial to ensure financial credibility and integrity and to drive the social entrepreneurship necessary for the medium-term. Only that approach will command Heads' confidence and encourage schools to contribute their own resources for the collective good.

11. **Background Papers and Consultation**

The White Paper 'The Importance of Teaching' DfE 2010 'Sustaining a local school improvement resource', 'Developing Support for School Improvement in Rotherham' and 'An example of school-led school improvement activity' - papers presented by SES to Headteachers and CYPS DLT January 2011. Performance Clinic 17th February, 2011. Strategic Management Team 21st March, 2011.

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