

TITLE: Coombes Task and Finish Group: Action Plan

FOR CONSIDERATION BY Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

WARD Non-specific

DIRECTOR Judith Ramsden, Director of People Services

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

Clarification of processes and communications around the authority's interventions with schools causing concern, benefiting transparency and accountability.

RECOMMENDATION

Members are recommended to challenge and question actions noted in the report, and to receive further reports as proposed.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

The Coombes Task and Finish group reported to the January 2017 meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny committee. The first recommendation of the members' group was

"...that the Children's Services team develop an action plan to address the learning points arising out of the Task and finish Group report and the Ofsted inspection of The Coombes Primary School in 2016".

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee endorsed this recommendation, and asked for a meeting to be set up for officers and group members to agree an action plan. The meeting asked for actions identified in response to the 17 recommendations to be consolidated around the three areas below:

1. Headteacher recruitment, guidance to governors and due diligence; titles for different categories of temporary headteacher and their roles to support schools during inspection;
2. LA involvement in schools causing concern and the role of School Improvement Officers, use of statutory and non-statutory warnings, sharing information with Overview and Scrutiny Committee and ward members;
3. Governors' role, training and skills, formality of meeting records.

Background

Elected members had undertaken an extensive review of the sequence of events leading to the current position of The Coombes Primary School, as reported to the previous meeting of the committee. An officer response with actions against each of the 17 detailed recommendations was circulated prior to the subsequent member/officer meeting. It was noted there that many of the recommendations were in hand, and identified that those recommendations fell into three areas:

1. Headteacher recruitment and roles
2. Transparency of school improvement activity
3. Governor engagement and training

In conclusion it was felt that clarity and coherence would be best served by consolidating the proposed actions under those headings. Commentary on each is below, with an action plan annexed.

Actions following the member/officer meeting were noted as follows; they are reflected in the action plan (see Annex)

- To submit the 'Guidance for schools and governors' to the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee;
- The review of the Local Authority's School Improvement Strategy will be undertaken for 2017/18. The Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny will be involved in the review;
- Regular reporting to Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee and local ward Member(s) of any schools causing concern (in a part 2 session);
- Members to be informed of governors' vacancies;
- The action plan with amended recommendations to be submitted to the next meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Analysis of Issues

Headteacher Recruitment and roles

The local authority has a thorough process and guidance document for Headteacher recruitment. The guidance follows national process and good practice and is reviewed annually with support provided by the Schools HR Consultant whenever required. Governors are well supported throughout the whole process. Exemplar materials were circulated at the recent Task and Finish group meeting.

This thorough guidance and process has been used for many years and for many schools, with excellent Headteacher appointments having been made. In the last year appointments have been made at Woodley, Addington, Radstock, St Sebastians, Oaklands Infant, Emmbrook Senior, Emmbrook Junior, Sonning, Crazies Hill, Willow Bank Infant and South Lake. New heads at Sonning and Willow Bank have already led their schools successfully through inspections.

Governors are encouraged to review all public information that is available for candidates who are shortlisted prior to interview. Two references are requested as part of the process with these required in writing prior to the interview days that take place for all candidates. These are then reviewed by the governors and school improvement office if any candidate is considered suitable to take forward to day 2 of the interview process.

Professional guidance is available with extensive support provided by the School Improvement Officer and Governor Services Manager throughout the whole process. This guidance and support has been provided for Headteacher recruitment for over 15 years. National guidance and documentation is recommended. Conflict of interests should be declared by any person in Headteacher position as part of the standard financial processes within a school. If there is anything additional to add, it is for the individual to inform governors.

Headteacher roles jargon is generally known to professionals. A factor in the Coombes case was the perceived need for the partner headteacher to distance himself from school management in order for his own Ofsted status not to be threatened. A compromise was arrived at to accommodate that in the interests of confirming what appeared a very positive arrangement, with the “consultant” label used but the individual nevertheless operationally involved. The role of the partner headteacher in inspection (recommendation 12) will be clarified and recorded in any relevant case in future.

In brief:

- *Consultant* means somebody giving professional advice, development or training. A consultant headteacher is a consultant with the general professional status of a headteacher
- *Interim* means replacing, in this case replacing a headteacher with line management and other statutory responsibilities included
- *Executive* headteachers are responsible for more than one school in a substantive and established role
- *Acting* headteachers are senior post-holders covering for an absent headteacher by agreement of their governors in the same school.

School Improvement functions and transparency

The role of School Improvement Officers is made clear in the LA’s School Improvement strategy “Signs of Success”, previously seen by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. This document is due for review for 2017-18 because of national moves to more sector (ie schools) – led school improvement systems and funding changes. LA professionals and schools will be involved in this process, part of which will be to clarify the changed roles of school improvement officers resulting from those funding and policy changes. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee would appropriately be involved in signing-off the policy review.

Children’s Services reporting to O&S on Schools Causing Concern has been agreed in principle and placed in the forward programme for part 2 items. This is consistent with the function of overview and has already been canvassed with headteachers with no negative feedback. The Head of School Improvement has also established a reporting cycle to secure accountability within Children’s Services management, and involving the lead member and the LA’s attached HMI.

Behind this lie individual plans at various levels of formality and confidentiality which are frequently professional/developmental as opposed to political/review processes. These include LA reviews/inspections, meetings, correspondence and plans. The majority would not be shared with members, not least because of matters of volume and pace, but in some cases they might be. Pre-warning notices are confidential professional documents sent to the headteacher and copied to the chair. It is noted that officers need to respect the position of the chair; keeping them in the loop is a matter of judgement according to the case in question, but it is agreed that officers must be mindful of the accountability of the chair for the success of school leadership. Warning Notices are statutory, and sent to the chair, copied to the headteacher and Ofsted.

A differentiated approach is needed in order to retain focus. Thus in relation to recommendations 5 & 6, most reports are routine matters of school data and teacher performance, sent confidentially to headteachers. Termly formal reports are copied to chairs. Church representatives are kept in the professional loop. Current practice has been to keep the lead member informed of all schools causing concern developments including pre-warnings and warnings, and more general updates have been issued in that way to members. It has been agreed to report regularly to O&S on schools causing concern, and reference to warnings – after the event – would be part of this. It is agreed that ward members will receive early notifications of cases which are likely to attain a public profile or involve statutory processes.

Experience of communications with partners is that email correspondence works. It is considered unlikely that headteachers and chairs would have any appetite to revert to home address as the destination for their correspondence, not least as it would make responding more difficult; moreover, in a time of reduced professional and administrative resource this would arguably sit uncomfortably with C21st council policy.

Minute taking is a matter for proportionate professional judgement. The key point here is to be careful to have an agreed record of a formal agreement.

Safeguarding is a shared responsibility involving roles of LA, Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) schools and their officers. LSCB maintains up-to-date guidelines, and schools' guidelines are published for schools on the Wokingham Schools Hub. Officers meet regularly with representative schools safeguarding leads in order to update and share good practice. Safeguarding is a priority in Ofsted inspections, and regular updates are also given at head teachers and chairs' briefings. The responsibility and capacity of the LA to guarantee updating is to be reviewed between the LA and LSCB, given the prominence of schools' autonomy is a matter of national policy.

Governance and Training

Governor support and training is a successful traded service. The annual training handbook extends to over 50 pages, and records of governors' attendance are kept as well as those of the feedback received. A group of Development Governors oversees this, with meetings taking place to review the training offer, plan the biennial conference, consider uptake and evaluations, and look at action planning. As well as a menu of courses for all, governors can elect for their own package.

Whenever there are changes to the Ofsted framework, additional training is provided for governors. This is usually in the form of an update at Chairs Briefing and also a full training session for governors to book. All governors are encouraged to attend; when the last major change took place, over 50 governors attended the training offered. Training sessions on Ofsted are offered to governors at least once every year but more recently they have been run twice in a year. An officer also goes out to individual governing bodies and runs full governing body training sessions on Ofsted.

Governors are continually encouraged to remain strategic in their thinking rather than operational. Governors can move into the operational focus more when a school requires more support, to try to assist the school. Sound protocols are needed to support this, and engagement of LA officers with governors has proved successful in many cases in this respect. Governor training is well attended, profitable and subject to positive feedback. It is a factor in the understanding of governors' roles and the success enjoyed by the great majority of Wokingham's schools.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe financial challenges over the coming years as a result of the austerity measures implemented by the Government and subsequent reductions to public sector funding. It is estimated that Wokingham Borough Council will be required to make budget reductions in excess of £20m over the next three years and all Executive decisions should be made in this context.

	How much will it Cost	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	Within agreed budgets	yes	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	ditto		
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	ditto		

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

n/a

Cross-Council Implications

Effective schools contribute to making Wokingham a great place to live, work and learn.

List of Background Papers

n/a

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Annex

Action Plan

Member Recommendations	Action	Timeline
<i>Planning the Approach</i>		
1	Develop an Action Plan	Completed
2	Report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee	Completed
Headteacher Recruitment		
8,9,10,11,12,13	<u>A report on headteacher recruitment</u> in Wokingham will be presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, covering processes, guidance, roles of governors, LA and diocesan advisers, and outcomes including cases where repeated processes have to occur.	For discussion of the forward programme 21 March O&S meeting
School Improvement		
3,5,6	<u>An expanded review of the School Improvement Policy</u> will include the role of school improvement officers, that of ward members, roles of partner headteachers notably in inspections, reporting and accountability.	For discussion of the forward programme 21 March O&S meeting
4,7	<u>Schools Causing Concern reporting to O&S</u> has been agreed in principle and placed in the forward programme for part 2 items. This will include reporting on schools in receipt of formal warnings or in Ofsted categories.	For discussion of the forward programme 21 March O&S meeting
Governance and Training		
14,15,16,17	<u>A report on governor support & training</u> will be placed in the O&S forward programme. These matters feature significantly in governor training and our routine work with school leaders.	For discussion of the forward programme 21 March O&S meeting