

Educational Attainment in Secondary Schools in the Forest of Dean

Task Group Report

1. Introduction

1.1 Elected members on the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee (CFOSC) had been concerned for some time with regard to educational performance at the secondary school level in the Forest of Dean District area. At a meeting of the committee on 19 May 2016 members received a presentation on the education structure in Gloucestershire. This presentation highlighted the disparity in educational attainment in the Forest of Dean area and the wider county - 50.3% of Forest school pupils achieve 5 GCSE A*-C including English and Maths against the county average of 61.9%. All secondary schools in the Forest of Dean have been in special measures at one time over the last three years, apart from Dene Magna which was consistently rated as outstanding.

1.2 At the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee (OSMC) on 27 May 2016 members agreed to establish a task group to consider this matter. Members of the task group were Cllrs Leppington (Chair), Oosthuysen, McMahon, Windsor Clive and Robinson.

1.3 A context setting meeting was arranged where members discussed: Ofsted ratings, educational attainment data, number of pupils on roll, the structure of the academy trusts in the Forest of Dean area.

1.4 Members identified questions to pose to schools in order to gauge the main challenges they face as well as their strengths and how they are improving. The questions were:

- What is going well?
- What challenges are you facing?
- Do you find that parents and governors provide you with adequate support and challenge?
- How helpful do you find the pupil premium funding?
- In an ideal world, what would you need to be an outstanding school?

1.5 Members visited five of the secondary schools in the Forest of Dean area: -

- Dene Magna, 4th November 2016 – Steve Brady, Headteacher
- Forest High School, 4th November 2016 – Nigel Johnson, Chair of Local Governing Body; Yvonne Jones, Executive Headteacher; Kevin Hamlin, Group Chief Executive of South Gloucestershire & Stroud College Academies Trust (SGSAT); Emma Jarman, Deputy Chief Executive SGSAT
- Lakers School, 9th November 2016 – John Reilly, Acting Headteacher; June Little, Chair of the Interim Executive Board
- Dean Academy, 9th November 2016 – Tom Beveridge, Headteacher; John Barrett, Headteacher support; Tim Gilson, CEO Athelstan Academy Trust; Karen Frost, Chair of the Local Governing Body
- Newent Community School, 14th November 2016 - Alan Johnson, Headteacher and Karen Elen, Chair of Governors

Further information about these schools is available at Annex A.

1.6 Throughout this work the task group was mindful that the council's ability to actively assist schools is limited by its changing relationship with them. Academies and free schools are directly funded by and accountable to the Secretary of State for Education; these are increasing in number and are responsible for their own improvement. Councils have a greater role in maintained schools, though these are relatively few in number in the

secondary sector, with the majority of secondary schools in the county having academy status. As five out of the six secondary schools in the Forest of Dean area are academies the council's role in improvement is limited, and so takes on more of an influencing role.

1.7 The task group recognised the key role played by the Head of Education Performance and Inclusion in working with schools to support their improvement; and valued her guidance and advice in its work on this matter.

2. Key Findings from the school visits

2.1 Members are already aware that educational attainment in the secondary sector in the Forest of Dean is below expectation overall. There are excess school places in the Forest of Dean area as illustrated by the number of places against capacity (aside from Dene Magna). Some families opt to send their children to schools in Gloucester, but a greater number opt to send their children across the borders into Herefordshire and Wales. A particular impact here is that school funding is linked to student numbers; this introduces financial challenges that do not help these schools to address their challenges.

2.2 The falling rolls and financial issues were cited by all of the schools, except Dene Magna, which is in the process of expanding its roll. However, Dene Magna identified young people leaving to attend schools outside the Forest of Dean as a challenge for the area in general.

2.3 The ability to attract and recruit sufficient high quality teachers into the Forest was identified as a significant issue by four out of five schools. This presented particular challenges when a school was trying to address the quality of teaching as identified in its Ofsted report. However, Newent Community School, located closer to Gloucester and larger road networks, indicated that they had not experienced any problems with recruitment.

2.4 The question of how to improve a school's reputation in the wider community was a particular factor, particularly where this was exacerbated by the poor condition of some school buildings.

2.5 There was a shared view that the physical and social geography of the Forest of Dean was in itself a challenge. There was now the added factor that some of the schools operated within their academy networks rather than with other schools in the area, which added to the sense of separation.

2.6 It was felt that transport links into/out of the Forest of Dean area could be improved; and that there was felt to be a general disparity in provision of services in comparison with the rest of Gloucestershire. It was suggested that this could be a factor in students, and their families opting to be educated outside the Forest of Dean.

3. Conclusion

- 3.1 To summarise, the principal issues identified through the visits to schools were: -
- Finance and falling numbers on roll
 - The over-provision of places in the area could be leading to competition rather than collaboration between schools
 - The ability to recruit and retain good teachers
 - How to change perceptions with regard to individual schools' reputations
 - How to address the sense of separation from the wider county
 - How to work with the wider community, including families and schools, to further encourage educational ambition and aspiration in the Forest of Dean area.

3.2 As already discussed, five out of the six the secondary schools in the Forest of Dean area are academies and the council's role in school improvement in these schools is therefore limited. However, the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC) does have the power to intervene, and the task group was pleased to note that the RSC has recently identified the Forest of Dean as a priority area. Members were pleased to note that the RSC has already called for a meeting with the Head of Education and the Head of Education Performance and Inclusion.

3.3 The task group is clear that any recommendations needed to add value and reflect the council's limited role in this area.

Recommendation 1

The task group recommends that with a new council in May 2017 the work of this task group should be used as part of a member development exercise to inform elected members on how the local authority's role in the provision of education has changed to a more influencing role within the Academy structure.

Recommendation 2

The task group recommends that the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee should use this report as a basis for a 'select committee' style meeting with the Regional Schools Commissioner and other stakeholders. The purpose of this meeting will be to draw out any actions/work identified by the RSC to address the educational issues in the Forest of Dean area; and to also understand the wider role of the RSC and the associated powers that go with this role.

Cllr Richard Leppington
Chairman

Secondary Schools in the Forest of Dean

The Dean Academy

The Dean Academy is a mixed 11-16 sponsored academy run by the Athelstan Trust. There are three schools in the trust. Dean Academy has a history of weak performance and inconsistent standards, and was placed in special measures in October 2015. Recent HMI monitoring reports indicate that the school is making reasonable progress to come out of special measures under the current leadership.

Dene Magna

Dene Magna is a mixed 11-16 academy that has received consistently outstanding Ofsted judgements. The school is popular, oversubscribed and is expanding. Dene Magna is designated as a Teaching School and leads a teaching school alliance of primary and secondary schools.

The Forest High School

The Forest High School is a mixed 11-16 sponsored academy run by South Gloucestershire and Stroud College Academy Trust (SGSAT) since 2015. Prior to 2015, the school was sponsored by E-Act. At the time of the visit, the Head has been in post for just over a year. However, she has secured another position from January 2017.

HMI monitoring reports indicate that progress has been relatively slow and that there remain areas of significant weakness. The school is small and pupil numbers are not forecast to increase significantly. There are related challenges regarding funding and the school's capacity to offer a broad and relevant curriculum. Forest High has an arrangement with Pate's Grammar as the support school.

Lakers School

Lakers School is a mixed 11-16 LA maintained foundation school and is part of a co-operative trust. The DfE and the office of the Regional Schools Commissioner have been arranging for a sponsor to take Lakers into a multi-academy trust since it was placed in special measures in December 2015.

The HMI monitoring letter from June 2016 indicates that the school has made good progress.

Newent Community School and Sixth Form Centre

Newent is a mixed 11-18 academy. It was judged to require special measures in January 2013 but in its inspection of January 2014 it was rated 'good'. The new head took up his post in September 2016.

Wyedean School and Sixth Form Centre

Wyedean School is a mixed 11-18 academy. It was placed in special measures in 2013; however it was rated 'good' in November 2014. The school is located close to the Welsh border and consequently attracts children from the neighbouring Chepstow. The task group did not visit this school.