

NOTES OF THE CONSULTATION MEETING BETWEEN ELECTED MEMBERS, OFFICERS AND REPRESENTATIVES OF THE OXFORDSHIRE GOVERNORS' ASSOCIATION (OGA) HELD ON THURSDAY 22 OCTOBER 2020 AT 4.00pm VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS

Present:

OGA Representatives: Carole Thomson [Chair] (CT), Judith Bennett (JB), June Nisbet (JN), Stan Terry (ST)

OCC Elected Members and Officers: Tim Brock (JP) [Lead Officer – Governor Services], Hayley Good (HG) [Deputy Director for Education], Kevin Gordon (KG) [Director of Children's Services], Kim James (KJ) [Head of School Improvement and Learning], Allyson Millward (AM) [Head of Access to Learning], Cllr. Michael Waine (MW) [Chair of the Education Scrutiny Committee]

In attendance: Katie Paxton [Clerk].

Apologies for absence: Doreen Rose (DR)

1. Matters arising from notes of meeting held on 11 February 2020

The notes had been previously approved by email.

The meeting due to be held on 11 May 2020 had been cancelled.

Many other events had been cancelled owing to Covid-19.

1.2 Premises maintenance plan

There was a £3.73m programme for school structural repair and maintenance. AM would ensure that the programme was circulated to all attendees. It was likely that the programme would commence in April 2021 for the new financial year.

1.4 Strategic plan for falling rolls

The F40 conference and MP's briefing had been cancelled and it was thought unlikely that the Oxfordshire MP's briefing took place.

1.5 OGA meeting

The OGA spring and summer open meetings did not happen due to Covid-19.

1.6 Communication

All meetings were taking place on line at the present time.

It was requested that briefings for Heads and Chairs emphasised that these could be attended by an alternate to the Chair to ensure proper representation of governors.

2. Elective home education (EHE)

There had been a big rise in children who were being home educated with a loss of around £400,000; there were now around 850 children on the EHE register which was normally around 650.

KG suggested that this placed schools in a perilous state as the huge rise in children being home educated came out of schools' budgets. Work had been done to avert an additional 50 children coming off roll and to get children back into schools. OCC was ready to speak to schools to talk about mitigation measures to stop the figure going up and to start activities to encourage parents to send their children to school. KG suggested that OCC could provide the extra capacity to consider ideas but that schools would need to finance the work as it was

schools' budgets that were impacted. OGA representatives noted that EHE was the responsibility of the local authority.

Officers met daily with DfE and reported on how many children were EHE and how many were going back into schools. DfE had also been asking about flexi-schooling requests but had not been asking more recently. It was understood that consideration was being given to introducing legislation to ensure registration of EHE children.

The mediation team was making a difference getting pupils back into schools. EHE was a lifestyle choice for some families but others chose to take their children off roll when schools were pushing at difficult issues.

The picture for EHE was disproportionately spread across the county with concentrations around Abingdon and Banbury. Accurate geographical information was not currently available.

It was noted that there were only 1.5 members of OCC staff to deal with EHE. CT suggested that consideration could be given to working with existing home-school link workers or other school staff on the ground.

3. Viability of small schools

KJ had done a piece of work around affordability of schools with a joint presentation by Governor Services, School Improvement and Finance. It had gone down well and had a positive impact. There were plans to run another affordable schools session to help planning for budgets.

5. Headteacher recruitment

KJ reported that all schools had a headteacher in post in September 2020. Two maintained primary schools had headteacher recruitment processes, one had 19 applicants and the other 16. Another school was currently recruiting and shortlisting was taking place that night. A secondary academy had also been recruiting but the outcome was not known, CT confirmed that the process had been completed satisfactorily. There had been some real positives despite a difficult environment and boards had good fields of candidates from which to choose. OCC had put on headship recruitment training for boards and free support for maintained schools through the process which had been well received.

2. In view of changes in directorate leadership and the impact of Covid is it envisaged that there will be changes made to consultation groups for education going forward?

OGA has representation on various groups including Education Scrutiny (OGA Chair as non-voting member), School Organisation Stakeholder Group, Oxfordshire Strategic Schools Partnership, Workforce Steering Group and the Learner Engagement Board.

OCC was providing an excellent service to governing boards for model policies, which extended to academies. Policies were considered and reviewed by the Workforce Steering Group, which ensured that unions and professional associations agreed that the policies were very secure and provided the best guidance for schools. The policies were widely used. The group over many years had also been the forum for discussing possible difficult issues emerging in schools and the presence of unions, officers and governors could often avert potential problems before these escalated. There was concern that in the last year the group had been given less priority by OCC officers. This was noted by OCC officers.

It was felt by OGA representatives that the Learner Engagement Board would benefit from a review of its structure. There was a membership of around 40 people who all attended meetings; the group was too big to be effective. HG agreed and confirmed that conversations were taking place to split off the Learner Engagement Board from the Early Help Board.

KG said that it was important that OCC successfully engaged with a wide group of people to jointly face the challenges ahead. The agenda should set the tone of those meetings and enable a really good debate.

It was agreed that the OGA/OCC consultation meeting was useful and would continue.

3. Communication with Governors has been a recurring challenge for the County Council. What mechanisms will be used to ensure that all governors are well informed?

Although OCC was doing well in communicating with boards, it was challenging to communicate with each governor individually and harder still to get them to read information sent. A number of ways to communicate with governors were now being used:

1. There was an increased reliance on GovernorHub. It was the most widely used communication channel for governors across the country and only eight maintained schools in Oxfordshire did not use it.
2. *Schools News* was sent out weekly and there was some confidence that it was read by school leaders.
3. In the past, Heads and Governors sessions were used though this had changed due to the lack of face-to-face meetings. One virtual meeting had taken place and there would be two more before Christmas.

KJ was directly involved in weekly communications with headteachers in schools across all sectors, maintained, academies and the independent sector. Around 100 schools were represented in this group.

4. Clerks' briefings were extremely useful to provide information to boards but also for OCC to get feedback. The last had been held virtually and had the highest attendance ever.

114 schools had been represented at the September Clerks' Briefing. This is the highest number of schools over the last year.

- September 2019 – 96 schools – 3 face-to-face sessions
- January 2020 – 79 schools – 3 face-to-face sessions
- May 2020 – 98 schools – pre-recorded PowerPoint. TB would circulate details of the number of non-LA clerks that attended the briefings.

(Appended to these minutes*).

5. OCC was interacting with governors on a live basis through training. More courses had been delivered since September 2020 than the whole period March to July 2020. Attendance averaged 32 governors per course which was higher than ever before.
6. All communication was also sent to CT and JB for dissemination.

There had previously been concerns that a letter had been sent to all governors that had not been circulated. The primary channel for information such as the appointment of KG and HG was through *Schools News* which was backed up, where appropriate, through GovernorHub.

Whilst work had been done to improve communication, KJ requested that governors notify OCC if it was not good.

4. We have heard anecdotal evidence that partnership meetings and Headteacher networks have proved useful and supportive in recent months. Does OCC have any evidence to support this, and if so how best can we all build on this?

The Special Schools heads group and secondary heads groups continued to meet. The primary schools heads group was being reignited with a small core of people who would spearhead it. It would be open to headteachers of all schools irrespective of sector.

KJ had met every Tuesday since March 2020 with headteachers. Initially it was with a representative from the 26 cluster groups but this had grown to around 100 attending every week. Headline data around the virus had been provided and there was an open forum and questions.

Schools with Covid related questions had a response within a couple of hours; the headteachers were then also invited to attend the Tuesday meeting.

Meetings were also held with MAT¹ leaders on Wednesday afternoons and independent schools on Thursdays.

All headteachers, whether maintained or academies, were invited to the meetings; there were some 100-120 attendees however it was noted that this was still nowhere near half of all headteachers in the county.

5.00pm KG left the meeting

It was planned to start locality-based meetings in vertical groupings in the New Year.

There were 18 MATs with three or more schools in Oxfordshire. The CEO² or most senior leader had been invited to meet with HG during the next half term. It was hoped that this would become an annual conversation in which the MAT had the opportunity to share key priorities but it was designed to embed and develop relationships between OCC and the MAT.

5. Financial pressures on schools are impacting significantly on decisions being made in schools. Does OCC have evidence on what has changed in consequence?

Officers had been asking DfE for guidance on what schools could claim for and it was understood that an announcement would be made shortly. Efforts had been made to help DfE to understand the additional costs being incurred and the challenges; up to 240 teachers were absent on any one day and the range of costs was far from simply hand sanitiser. Some schools were in better financial state than others but all had significant additional pressures.

The National Funding Formula (NFF) disproportionately affected small schools. OCC had done work on the affordable school in January 2020 which had offered help for schools to have their curriculum within the confines of their budget; consideration was given to national benchmarking data.

5.12pm MW left the meeting

CT attends F40 Executive on behalf of Oxfordshire; other local authorities were saying similar things about the funding constraints and a letter from F40 had been sent to the DfE. HG advised that returns on SEND funding information had been submitted to F40 the previous week, identifying the pressures on high needs budgets; the F40 analysis was expected in mid-November. CT commented that the F40 technical group was very helpful and had done a lot of the groundwork relating to the true cost of running a school.

¹ Multi academy trust

² Chief Executive Officer

It was noted that the February 2020 Ofsted report on financial issues in schools had stated that class sizes in 91% of secondary schools had increased and the number of TA³s reduced. It was a worrying time due to Covid-19 and with reductions in staffing, courses being cut and increases in class sizes, there was a concern that it would impact on teachers' health.

SEND issues were increasing the pressures on schools. Some top-up funding had been agreed for primary and Special Schools. Special Schools in the county were desperately underfunded in comparison with the rest of the country and work was required to see what support they could be offered.

It was noted that DfE did not discuss budgets for academies; academies received the same funding as maintained schools but had additional expenditure in terms of accountancy requirements etc. In some instances savings could be made by sharing across schools but this was not enough to offset the costs.

Special Schools were proposing to write to OCC about funding as government passed money to the local authority but this was not passed on to schools. They wanted to know when additional money would come through. Officers had heard Special School headteachers expressing their frustration and desperation and were aware that something needed to be done urgently to agree a way forward in the short term. There was £22m deficit on the high needs budget already and even a small uplift would require a six-figure sum, which would need OCC Cabinet approval.

6. What information, if any, has OCC been able to establish about the impact on students of centre assessed grades for GCSEs and A levels, given the indications that students from poor backgrounds had been further disadvantaged?

Information relating to GCSE and A level results had not been gathered. OCC's area of concern was focused on improving outcomes for SEN and disadvantaged children; this remained the strategic focus though the situation may have got worse through Covid-19.

Attendance by all pupil groups has been strong across Oxfordshire and above national averages. Absence was between 4-6% for every category of school. Attendance at Special Schools varied considerably and as there were only 12 in the county the data impacts the statistics disproportionately, despite this, attendance at our special schools were generally above the national average.

91 schools have had a Covid-related issue to date. Efforts were being made to minimise the number of children at home whilst being conscious of the public health message. Quality first teaching was key for all children.

7. Dates of the future meetings for academic year 2020-21

CT would liaise with Lynda Burns to set dates.

KJ thanked governors for their work supporting schools; it was noted that they were volunteers, many of whom have full time jobs. The support that had been given to headteachers was really appreciated through some quite lonely times.

KG and HG were addressing governors at the OGA Open Meeting taking place on 19 November 2020 at 7.00-8.30pm. Any officers were welcome to attend. The meeting was being held virtually with the technical support of OTSA, which had been extremely supportive.

The meeting ended at 5.31pm

³ Teaching assistant

*** Additional information concerning attendance at Clerk's briefings:**

- 42 Clerks attended in total representing 114 schools.
- Of these 42, 37 logged on and attended the session. The other 5 confirmed that they had read all the information from the session, but did not log onto the session.
- 33 were LA Clerking Service Clerks. 9 were non LA Clerking Service Clerks. There is overlap between these 2 groups as some LA Clerks are also Clerks at schools not subscribing to the LA Clerking Service. Where we have this information it has been included in the number of schools represented.
- We do not have data on the number of maintained schools or academies represented. They are treated the same. Information at briefings covers both as some Clerks will clerk both types of schools.
- Bookings are from either Clerks who are part of the LA Clerking Service or Clerks whose school/s subscribe to the Clerks' training package.
- All schools, regardless of them being maintained or academy are given the opportunity to subscribe to the Clerks' training package through the annual subscription to the SLA.