

OXFORDSHIRE GOVERNORS' ASSOCIATION

Minutes of the Open Meeting held at 7.00pm on Thursday 19th November 2020 Virtually via Zoom

The Chair opened the meeting and thanked everyone for attending. She welcomed the three keynote speakers from Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) and they introduced themselves to the meeting.

Tim Brock, Lead officer for Governance (Full record is attached as an Appendix)

- Extensive experience in industry and more recently as a school governor.
- Outlined OCC service offer for governors.
- Thanked governors for their work and commitment during a difficult year.

Kevin Gordon (KG) Corporate Director of Children's Services

- He started his role with OCC this summer.
- Recognises that after a period of instability, a period of consolidation is needed.
- Grateful for the opportunity to speak to governors.
- Considers his role to be responsible for children in all schools be they maintained or academies, so is concerned with all forms of governance in the County, Trustees & Governors alike.

Hayley Good (HG) Deputy Director Education

- Apologised as she has problems accessing meetings via zoom due to OCC security systems so logged in on her phone.
- She started her role with OCC on 15 June 2020 so is still getting to know people

There followed interactive presentations from Kevin and Hayley and questions from the floor asked through Zoom chat. Copies of PowerPoint Slides used are available at <http://oga4schoolgovernors.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/OGA-Presentation-19-Nov-2020.pptx>

A summary of the key points

HG outlined OCC's statutory duties for children and young people:

- Ensure Access to learning – pupil place planning
- Education capital funding for maintained schools
- Admissions
- Home to school transport
- Health and Safety support
- Early years sufficiency
- Academisation
- Vulnerable learners:
 - Attendance
 - Children missing education
 - Exclusions

- Elective home education (which is increasing significantly)
- Alternative provision
- SEND¹

HG provided detail on how her team covers these responsibilities:

- Kim James is lead officer for School Improvement, supporting standards and achievement for all maintained schools and she line manages governor services
- Deborah Bell leads on alternative provision and vulnerable learners
- The OXSIT² team is a fully traded service which supports schools with attendance and exclusions issues
- Graham Pirt is the interim lead of the SEND team for six months, a very high profile area.

She then outlined the Universal Offer:

- 22 services available to all schools within Oxfordshire
- The vast majority of schools are engaging with OCC and increasingly academies are engaging with officers

KG gave an overview of further specific support for schools and some of the key problems facing OCC:

- COVID-19 support. The way OCC supports schools has had to pivot because of the pandemic
 - Recognise that this is probably the most stressful time in Head Teachers' careers
 - Weekly virtual meetings open to all head teachers
 - Support and advice about which children to send home to isolate, etc
 - Most schools now have their own supply routes for PPE³ but OCC keeps a supply
 - Lots of advice and guidance provided for governors – how to support head teachers and leadership teams
 - Daily calls with DfE⁴ – able to crystallise what is happening on the ground
 - Effectiveness of some of government policy positions
 - Email and phone helplines available seven days a week
 - The team is doing all it can to ensure children return to school
 - Started to build relationships with teachers in schools
- Safeguarding
 - Have seen an increase in families that need help and support
- Attendance
 - Attendance for second half of this term is well above national average but it is evident that COVID-19 cases in school are affecting attendance
 - Special school attendance has dropped recently as result of guidance for children who are extremely clinically vulnerable

¹ Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

² Oxfordshire School Improvement Team

³ Personal Protective Equipment

⁴ Department for Education

- Attendance of children with EHCP⁵ and children with social worker was being tracked
- Elective Home Education (EHE)
 - Now 870 children OCC are aware of in EHE in Oxfordshire
 - KG's general principle is that children are better off coming into school
 - He thinks the attendance team have managed to stop EHE numbers becoming higher by visiting schools and mediating with parents
 - It is definitely an area that needs to be watched; schools are funded on per pupil basis so losing another 200 pupils from the state school system impacts on income
- Early help networks
 - Not as large as some places in the country – but there are good networks in place in Oxfordshire between early help networks and staff working within our schools
 - Regular networks share information – these are seeing the impact of pandemic with more families looking for help

HG discussed further pressing issues:

- SEND is a major priority now
- There are significant financial pressures which schools are feeling daily

Funding

- A transformation project is underway in order to address some of the deficit. Four strands were detailed:
 - SEND sufficiency – there are not enough places in Oxfordshire to meet the need which continues to grow year on year
 - Some children were costing significant amounts of money
 - It took a lot of work to ensure predictions are accurate in order to determine the number of places required
 - Forecasting that OCC will have a £22 Million deficit on high needs budget: Even with some £7.5 Million of additional funding there is an in year deficit 2020-21 of £11 million, adding to the accumulated deficit of another £11 Million
 - It is a statutory requirement to submit a plan to determine how OCC will begin to address that deficit – a huge piece of work likened to turning a juggernaut
 - OCC is working with schools to determine when interventions should be put in place to meet needs – the earlier you intervene the more money you can save
 - Ensuring that commissioning links to sufficiency
 - Ensuring that the right people are identified for the right places
 - 360 pupils out of county are costing around £19 Million a year not including transport cost. An average of £53,000 per head
 - There are insufficient places in county to meet the need and growing parental choice to move children with high needs to Oxfordshire is exacerbating the problem
 - A lot of work is underway to develop improved commissioning

⁵ Education, Health and Care Plan

- A lot of work also underway around accelerated SEND progress plan
- It is a Statutory requirement to produce this plan – arises from SEND inspection in 2014. The team also have to produce a statement of inspection
- Noted that when SEND officers are doing that they are not able to do other work
- There remain a couple of key areas OCC is still reporting to the DfE on:
 - timeliness of EHC plans and the rate OCC produce them. The statutory requirement is to produce within 20 weeks: currently running at around 50-55% meeting this target, itself a massive improvement on last year at only 30% but still not acceptable
 - Communications with parents and carers – how OCC can better work in partnership for true co-production – genuinely have a seat around the table

High needs block funding

- Part of the Dedicated Schools Grant
- OCC cannot bail this out from general funds. This is partly why there is such pressure
- Government is forcing local authorities to balance their budgets within money allocated
- Within Oxfordshire – one of F40 most poorly funded local authorities – the money allocated is not enough to cope with the pressure in the system
- The High Needs Block has a cumulative deficit £11 Million leading into 2020
- There is to be an additional meeting of the Schools Forum to look at additional top up funding for maintained schools
- The Issues are complex and include:
 - Too many children and young people being placed out of county with independent providers
 - Not enough money being spent in county for special schools
 - Schools Forum has to look at the sufficiency of funding for special schools and how additional funding can be found for them
 - Lack of monitoring of independent sector outcomes
 - Many of the ones OCC are using out of county are considered by OFSTED to be less than good so the quality of provision is not acceptable – OCC is failing young people

High needs spend

- OCC is spending more on independent provision year on year; now £20.6 Million per year
- This compares with £18.5 million spending on Oxfordshire special schools
- The proportions are wrong
- OCC is looking hard at how to develop more specialist capacity in county to support high needs
- It would be detrimental to remove young people from provision. This will need to be turned around over time as young people leave those provisions – get younger children into provision within County

QUESTIONS/COMMENTS From Zoom Chat

- ❖ The HNB deficit is the same as the money paid to government facilitators on PPE contracts
 - That puts it into perspective

- ❖ A few days ago the Children's Commissioner was on TV and mentioned that Oxfordshire is failing a high percentage of SEND young people
 - KG - The System is broken
 - KG logged onto Commissioner's website and read the report. He found it a chilling read
 - We have a relatively high exposure to residential provision
 - We are doing a lot of work to recruit foster carers
 - Anyone considering becoming a foster carer please go onto OCC website
 - Looking after our children – Oxfordshire is an outlier
 - Children in residential care has become an industry – an indictment of the system
 - There is a lot of work to rebuild some OCC residential childcare facilities and recruit more foster carers - more support and training is needed
 - Children having tough time can be quite challenging

Kate Barlow

- ❖ Is there top up funding for SEND in nursery schools?
 - HG – yes. We are looking at a formula for a way to allocate it fairly
 - The earlier we can intervene the more it saves and the more we can avoid the specialist placements we are having to commission.

Sarah Simmons

- ❖ At one point Oxfordshire had lots of children's homes; why did they shut them?
 - KG cannot comment as it was before his tenure
 - There are still some and we have had discussions around building new provision
 - These things seem to come in phases

Carole Thomson, as Chair of the Schools Forum

- ❖ How can schools be supported to be as inclusive as they can be? A lot of head teachers are committed to being inclusive, but as schools get no extra funding for any child not on an EHCP effectively, schools are being pressured to shift away from being inclusive for financial reasons.
 - We need to be lot more open and forthcoming about how SEND is funded – it is not funded enough, particularly given the changes in legislation introduced in 2014
 - Everyone involved in educating children knows that there is not enough money. It is for OCC as custodians of the High Needs budget to spend it as wisely as possible to meet needs, being fair, equitable and spreading the money as far as it can go
 - It is a particularly difficult situation here – more money is being spent to support children in specialist education out of the county than any other shire county in the country

- Changes need to be done in a careful, sensitive and planned way
- Investment is needed at the front end to prevent needs requiring more costly interventions later

Some support is available

- Kate Bradley (Strategic Development and Improvement Manager SEND) is leading the transformation strand providing support to enable SEND children and young people to remain in mainstream schools

Brenda Williams

- ❖ Helping create a better way of supporting schools, especially primaries, is key
 - KG: I agree. We need to work out a safe way of disinvesting from the top end and investing at the bottom

Malcolm Edge

- ❖ We need to be better at investing in EHCPs
 - There have been improvements in performance and productivity in this area
- ❖ Is there a Home Education problem in BAME⁶ communities?
 - KG had not seen high prevalence in BAME
- ❖ Do you have a team of attendance officers? What is their experience and reach?
 - KG would welcome a conversation offline if OCC was not reaching BAME communities and attendees have information in that area
- ❖ This had been raised through OGA's consultation with OCC
- ❖ What is "K funding"?
 - Early years top up funding

Stan Terry

- ❖ Are we lobbying the Government for help with the additional costs of COVID-19?
 - A number of organisations are challenging DfE about this
 - There is a link on the OGA website to the NAHT⁷ petition to get a discussion in parliament
 - OCC has been lobbying very hard
- ❖ When will schools get pay out for the autumn term?
 - HG will take this back to the policy team – a high proportion of the documented number of lost teaching days is due to COVID-19.

Sarah Simmons

- ❖ A Special Schools documentary is on BBC iPlayer. I recommend all to watch it

Katie Paxton

- ❖ Does OCC have any plans to set up its own multi academy trust for maintained schools to join such as that in Hertfordshire?
 - KG: We have no plans for that at the present time but I will pass it on to the education team. It is an interesting idea

⁶ Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic

⁷ National Association of Headteachers

Sally

- ❖ One of the wider issues within Children's Services is the impact of pandemic on young people wellbeing. What can we do as schools?

Carole Thomson

- ❖ COVID-19 has become a massive pressure – assuming vaccinations become available and we get back to some sort of normality how do you see your roles developing?

HG:

- I am keen to develop relationships with all our schools – I am very aware of turbulence in leadership teams, particularly in academies and MATs⁸
- A significant proportion of schools are academised but the rate of academisation has slowed down
- We have some big and influential MATs represented in the county
- OCC has established “keep in touch” meetings with any MAT with three or more schools; there are 18 MATs representing over 100 schools. HG was inviting them to meet individually with her to discuss⁹ any needs their schools have and ways OCC can offer support as well as to share best practices
- DfE asks for our views – it is difficult for OCC to give an objective view if officers do not know them
- We are all here for same reason; to raise the life chances of young people
- We all have a responsibility for supporting children

KG:

- We need to maintain good standards across Oxfordshire schools
- Closing the gap – 10 wards in Oxfordshire have amongst the highest rates of deprivation across country
- Early help and locality networks – schools are safe places for children but could be better – how to support schools to be hubs for people in their communities – coming out of the pandemic, there will be lots of people in our community who will need our help
- We have responsibilities for the wellbeing of our headteachers and staff which ultimately comes back to the governing board
- KG thinks that school leaders are the most important priority now
- On a practical level Kim James has put together a package of support for head teachers specifically, which will be coming out imminently
- KG knows that staff are exhausted at the moment: many parents and others do not understand the extent of the pressure on them now
- Headteacher briefings on Tuesdays are attracting in excess of 100. They are scheduled for one hour but are getting longer; headteachers often hold on to have informal chats with colleagues.
- Pastoral support is critical – we are taking things on week by week, day by day basis
- The fun has gone out of schools because of pressure and the management of COVID

⁸ Multi academy trusts

- Children are also feeling the lack of fun and that creates additional pressure on staff
- A positive thing is the “be kind” messaging to boost everyone’s wellbeing

In closing the meeting, the Chair thanked the three keynote speakers; their openness and honesty is very welcome. She thanked everyone for attending and hoped that all had found the evening interesting and informative.

The meeting closed at 8:30pm

APPENDIX: Tim Brock

Good evening and thank you for this opportunity to introduce myself and our work. I lead Oxfordshire County Councils Governor Services team, manage their traded offer and am responsible for supporting governors and improving leadership in maintained schools. Previously I held roles with Beam Suntory, Bass PLC, The Forestry Commission and as a Policy Advisor to The Under Secretary of State for Employment.

I was a Foundation Governor at St James’ Church of England Primary School Cheltenham from 2009 to 2018, I chaired their Ethos Committee before becoming Vice Chair and was Chair of Governors for four years during which time the school became an academy and joined The Diocese of Gloucester MAT. I am now a trustee of that MAT and a Trustee at Demark Road High School, a stand-alone academy in Gloucester.

I began working for OCC in July 2019. Our ambition remains to strengthen leadership in our schools through strong governance and in so doing improve outcomes for the children.

As you know this is a challenge and we are so very grateful for your commitment. We are here to support you and to provide advice and guidance that enables you to not only be compliant but also to support and add to the thinking of school leaders to ensure that they are held to account for educational and financial performance.

Enabling you to be effective governors is fundamental.

You have responded extraordinarily during the pandemic. The role of boards in being accountable for the safety and wellbeing not only of children at school but also of staff has been brought into sharp relief.

For our part we worked swiftly to adapt our methods of delivery and communication, areas of immediate focus were recruitment and training both of governors and clerks or governance professionals. During lockdown #1 all training course content was reviewed, trainers up skilled and software rolled out allowing seamless delivery of first-class governor support. All our courses have been provided virtually since Easter 2020.

We are currently delivering at least one course every week and average attendance has doubled compared to last year. Feedback is very positive, 96% of respondents say that the trainers are knowledgeable about the topic and 94% say that the content will help them to more effectively. The average score out of 5 for our content and delivery is 4.7.

In addition to our virtual 'live' training we have introduced bite sized courses, which can be accessed any time, and special events. The first event focussed on Children We Care For and the second, held last night, explored the Service Pupil Premium and was attended by over 60 governors.

By Christmas we will have delivered 3 virtual briefings for Chairs of Governors. The focus to date has been Covid and teacher wellbeing. Over 150 governors have attended these briefings which were promoted through Governor Hub, Schools News and the OGA.

Our most recent clerks briefing, again held virtually, had the highest attendance of any such session in the last 12 months and feedback on all aspects of course delivery is overwhelmingly positive. Attendees regularly tell us that the saving on travel time and cost is significant and of course there are additional environmental benefits.

GS now work closely with Inspiring Governance who operate a web-based recruitment tool for those interested in becoming a school governor or trustee and for those schools seeking to fill vacancies. We have seen good levels of success since the partnership began especially in vulnerable schools where governance needed strengthening. But we are aware that recruitment remains a challenge particularly for foundation roles.

Diversity is also an opportunity; boards are not necessarily representative of the communities they serve. We are keen to ensure that school governance in Oxfordshire more accurately reflects society.

Our work with colleagues across the School Improvement Team has delivered tangible improvements across a range of schools and I am very grateful for the time and effort that you as governors provide. Your work is so important.

Thank you to Carole, Judith and the OGA executive for allowing me to introduce myself and tell you a little about our work. We are here to improve outcomes for children, and I know that we are all aligned in that mission.

Tim Brock
Governor Services
November 2020