

Education Scrutiny Committee

Meeting to be held on Thursday, 6 December 2018

Electoral Division affected:
(All Divisions);

The Future of Maintained Nursery Schools

(Appendix 'A' refers)

Contact for further information:

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Executive Summary

The Interim Executive Director of Education and Children's Services set up a task and finish group in recognition of the significant financial challenges being faced by maintained nursery schools (MNS) and their valuable role in the early education of vulnerable children in Lancashire. The intended outcome was to support maintained nursery schools sustainability and future direction.

The purpose of this report is to provide members of the Education Scrutiny Committee details of the work undertaken by the task and finish group between June and October 2018.

Recommendation

The Education Scrutiny Committee is recommended to:

- i. Consider the information in this report.
- ii. Note the proposed actions in the future and the intention to have regard to relevant statutory guidance.
- iii. Discuss and agree any further recommendations.

Background and Advice

The scope of the Task and Finish group was as follows:

- Develop strategy to support maintained nursery schools to be sustainable.
- Strengthen partnership working in the context of the maintained nursery sector and the significant financial pressures on service delivery.
- Explore asset management opportunities such as co-location of services, creative use of space and multi-agency use based on local authority need.

- Explore opportunities for alternative models of delivery (e.g. collaboration, school organisation).
- Explore opportunities to make effective use of the expertise and experience of maintained nursery schools in Lancashire.

The group included the following members / their representatives:

- Representatives from Maintained Nursery Schools (including the Chair of the Lancashire Federation)
- Interim Executive Director of Education and Children's Services
- Head of Service for School Improvement
- Head of Service Financial Management (Development and Schools)
- Head of Early Years (School Improvement Service)
- Head of Service Special Educational Needs and Disability
- Head of Service Children and Family Wellbeing (CFW)
- Head of Service Asset Management
- HR Services Manager (Schools)

The following actions were undertaken:-

Maintained Nursery Schools

- A group of nursery heads through the federation wrote a Home learning environment bid to the Northern Power House fund – feedback is awaited.
- Met with Child and Family Wellbeing Service to discuss Troubled Families offer.
- Headteacher met with the Head of Service Financial Management to discuss possible reductions to buy backs and how MNS run.
- Headteachers have met and identified ways forward to support future sustainability including, working together as a professional development group, offering professional development opportunities to each nursery school and beyond. The group are in contact with leads from SHARES in Skelmersdale.
- Nursery schools are collaborating to identify cost savings across the 24 schools such as support for health and safety, SENCO support, collective buying of resources and property services. Bench marking exercises will be taking place.
- Headteachers are developing a website for the federation to share each schools expertise.
- Work to collaborate with the CFW to explore how to support disadvantaged two year olds is being explored.

Head of Service Financial Management (Development and Schools)

Ongoing intensive financial support to a number of MNS who are in financial difficulties – this is resulting in significantly improved financial stability within the sector. Circa. 10 MNS have been involved in detailed combined financial and early years review resulting in recovery plans stabilising those worked with. This activity is by no means complete but the main focus is now shifting to working with category 3 rather than category 2 MNS. This will include benchmarking analysis/reporting and training seminars with all MNS. Resources are limited and being focussed on the most challenged.

Head of Early Years (School Improvement Service)

The Head of Early Years made direct contact with the Chief Executive of Early Education and recommended local authority service leaders around:

- The role and contribution of maintained nursery schools in the different LA contexts.
- Impact of funding on maintained nursery schools.
- Local authority strategies for supporting sustainability.

Impact: feedback was shared with task and finish group members. Collaboration was the only strategy specifically being explored by other LAs and Lancashire has several examples of embedded practice of this.

The local authority contributed to the DfE's commissioned research for the Treasury Department on the economic contribution of maintained nursery schools. Detailed data was collated by the maintained nursery schools and local authority and evidenced through individual case studies and collated census data. This demonstrated the extent to which maintained nursery schools serve vulnerable children in Lancashire.

The researchers were particularly interested in the joined up approach of the Childcare Sufficiency Team Leader and Finance Officer working in partnership with schools HR which was seen as highly effective strategy not seen in any of the other 22 local authorities visited. The researchers shared that bespoke approaches appeared to be most effective as each maintained nursery school has its own context requiring tailored support and guidance. This reinforced the value of the strategic approach being adopted in Lancashire. Given the considerable time demand involved in this bespoke work, some additional capacity has been included in the school improvement service review.

Head of Service Special Educational Needs and Disability

New processes within SEND have now been introduced for children in the early years. It is anticipated these will reduce bureaucracy and timescales, thus enabling identification and intervention at an earlier stage, and which could include additional financial support via the inclusion fund. This is beginning to impact on MNS now.

Head of Service Children and Family Wellbeing (CFW)

The Children & Family Wellbeing Service have developed an offer to a small cohort of Maintained Nursery Schools inviting them to contribute to the requirements of the national Troubled Families Unit (TFU) Programme. This was presented to the Headteachers at the task & finish group meeting on the 18 September. The Headteachers were keen to further discuss the proposal and a separate meeting is now being arranged for CFW colleagues and MNS colleagues to discuss this in more detail. Dates have been offered to the Headteachers and CFW are awaiting their confirmation. This is a time limited offer as the TFU programme comes to an end in March 2020 (as at Appendix 'A').

Head of Service Asset Management

The service will continue to give consideration to alternate use of surplus accommodation within maintained nursery schools. This accommodation varies greatly and so detailed information including floorplans are held for each premises.

A range of alternate use is under consideration with a particular focus on services which provide education, care and support functions that would be compatible with each site taking into account issues such as access control, safeguarding etc.

Where alternate use is identified and supported, this will require negotiation of an agreed statement of occupancy to determine the sharing of costs.

HR Services Manager (Schools)

The Schools HR team is either working with or has already worked with 8 nursery schools in relation to their budget/potential overstaffing.

Next Steps

The next steps will be to:

Children and Family Wellbeing/Maintained Nursery School proposal

Short Term

- Meeting with MNS Headteachers (date to be confirmed) to discuss in more detail the proposal.
- Headteachers to confirm which (if any) is their preferred option from the proposal.
- Dates for MNS commencing to contributing to the TFU programme to be agreed once MNS have confirmed their acceptance and option choice.
- CYP and families to be identified who MNS will work with under the principles of the TFU programme if proposal is accepted.
- MNS to evidence achievement of sustained change (improved outcomes) in line with the Outcomes Plan (minimum of 6 months/maximum of 12 months).

Schools Finance

- Continue to work with all MNS who are in financial difficulty to ensure that medium term stability is achieved in as many settings as possible.
- Complete the benchmarking work that is currently underway and share with the sector to identify any efficiencies that can be shared.
- Undertake further financial training with Governors and senior management.

Schools HR

- A representative of the team has agreed to attend a future Nursery Headteachers meeting, to discuss with them the various TA roles/gradings available to Headteachers and also the use of variable hours contracts.
- In addition, the team will continue to provide support as required.

Asset Management

- Undergo a full evaluation of county assets and use of rented premises.
- Identify potential co-location, closure/non-renewal of rental arrangements e.g. CSC/Adult Learning/Pupil Access, looking at MNSs that had children's centres first.
- Cost out necessary adaptations to usage.

SEND

- Committed to early identification and support, so that the costs for support do not fall solely on nursery schools.

School Improvement

- Include and promote use of expertise of MNS in development of inclusion hubs for each district. This would include provision for excluded YR children.

Maintained Nursery Schools

- Across the federation, review arrangements for training. Identify common training needs and opportunities, share the costs.
- Undergo benchmarking exercise: staffing, spending, health and safety.
- Considered shared appointments across the sector, as and when opportunities arise.

Local Authority

- Continued collaboration with strategic leads to ensure nursery schools are a thread in county decision making.

It was resolved that the local authority will continue to have regard to relevant statutory guidance.

DfE Guidance for decision-makers/ Statutory guidance for decision-makers deciding prescribed alteration and establishment and discontinuance proposals (April 2016) page 28:

Nursery schools and the presumption against closure

There is a presumption against the closure of nursery schools. This does not mean that a nursery school will never close, but the case for closure should be strong and the proposal must demonstrate that:

- Plans to develop alternative provision clearly demonstrate that it will be at least as equal in terms of the quantity as the provision provided by the nursery school with no loss of expertise and specialism; and
- Replacement provision is more accessible and more convenient for local parents.

DfE Early education and childcare/ Statutory guidance for local authorities (March 2018)

To secure flexible delivery, local authorities should:

A2.16 Make full use of their maintained nursery schools, if they have them. Maintained nursery schools are almost exclusively good or outstanding, the majority are located in disadvantaged areas and they have early year's expertise and experience that can be used to benefit the whole local area. Local authorities should ensure that they have a role in the pedagogical leadership for the local early year's system. What this means in practice will depend on local need, but it might include for example: commissioning nursery schools to develop and deliver a quality improvement strategy for the area; having nursery schools work with other providers to share their experience and expertise to raise the overall quality of provision across the area; helping nursery schools to work in partnership with other providers to offer the 30 hours entitlement; and providing funding to nursery schools to allow them to deliver family support services.

Consultations

N/A

Implications:

This item has the following implications, as indicated:

Risk management

There are significant financial challenges being faced by maintained nursery schools which may impact on their valuable role in the early education of vulnerable children in Lancashire.

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985
List of Background Papers

Paper	Date	Contact/Tel
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NA		
Reason for inclusion in Part II, if appropriate		

N/A