

THE FUTURE OF THE CAMBRIDGE AND WISBECH LEARNING BASES AND THE QUALITY ASSURANCE OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

To: Children and Young People Committee

Meeting Date: 13 January 2015

From: Adrian Loades, Executive Director: Children, Families and Adults Services

Electoral division(s): All

Forward Plan ref: N/a **Key decision:** No

Purpose: To update the Committee regarding plans for the Cambridge and Wisbech Learning Bases of the County school and to update on plans for quality assurance of alternative provision

Recommendation:

- a) To note progress towards a sustainable future for the Learning Bases
- b) To approve the quality assurance policy

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1.0 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Planning for the devolvement of funds for alternative secondary education to school led Behaviour and Attendance Improvement Partnerships (BAIPs) began in 2006 with a joint project board of Head teachers and of the Local Authority established and chaired by Adrian Loades. After a period of considerable planning, the funding transfer took place in 2009/10 with each of the five District based BAIPs taking responsibility for the commissioning of alternative provision and committing to reduce permanent exclusions. A partnership agreement was made between each of the BAIPs and the Local Authority for the continuing purchase of places in both the Pupil Referral Units (PRU) and the remaining tuition centres. This change to the commissioning process led to a significant reduction in the range and size of centrally managed alternative provision, as Heads began to reduce the demand on the system through the provision of on-site inclusion work. The numbers fell from over 650 full- and part-time places in the alternative provision service to 120 full-time places over three years.
- 1.2 Schools began to manage more behaviourally challenging young people themselves through the provision of on-site and individually tailored curriculum offers. This also included provision for those pupils with medical needs. The number of young people placed outside of mainstream school began to sharply decline as schools invested in both their own provision and that collectively commissioned within partnerships. The devolvement process also led to the separation of young people with Statements of Special Education Needs (SEN) from the alternative provision cohort which led to the creation of the multi-site Trinity School for this group of young people.
- 1.3 In 2011 the three remaining Pupil Referral Units (PRU) amalgamated to create the County School as a multi-site school with learning bases in Cambridge, March and Huntingdon. The March site moved to a new building in Wisbech built within the Building Schools for the Future capital programme. The County School was registered with the Department for Education as a Pupil Referral Unit with a single Ofsted identification number. This was a necessary step in order to drive up standards across the school with the aim of meeting the rising expectations established by Ofsted to improve teaching and learning in all settings. This was clearly a successful strategy with a Good Ofsted inspection grading in February 2013.
- 1.4 Members will be aware that the national education funding arrangements changed in 2012/13 with the creation of core funding blocks. The alternative education budget is identified within the High Needs Block. New government guidance has become much more certain in regard to the quality that alternative provision should deliver and who should access it. Arrangements for the inspection of alternative education have been strengthened by Ofsted with Inspectors directed to seek out pupils who are on a school roll but who are educated off site. Schools are now required by Ofsted to keep a list of pupils receiving alternative education. In 2012 the Department for Education published a report concerning alternative education written by their expert advisor Charlie Taylor. One of the recommendations in this report was that the Local Authority should cease to be the provider of alternative education and

that academy conversion should be the direction of travel for existing provision.

1.5 Huntingdon Learning Base closed at the end of the last school year 2013/14. The future of the two remaining bases in Wisbech and Cambridge are being considered by each BAIP as they determine their future operating models for alternative provision. This may be seen as the break-up of the County School model (of three sites being led by an Executive Head) as the provision becomes increasingly directed towards differing local needs and local management arrangements overseen by the schools.

1.6 In a paper considered by this Committee on 3rd June 2014 a number of options were discussed for the future of the two remaining Learning Bases. It appears likely that they will become Alternative Provision Academies and therefore move from Local Authority control to independent status. This process is similar to the academy transfer process that mainstream schools have undergone. To this end discussions with potential sponsoring Academy Trusts are beginning.

1.7 It is possible that a school or partnership might offer to manage the current provision directly and this has been discussed with schools and partnerships but does not appear to be an option that any school or partnership wishes to take on. Should this become a viable option then the Council would need to consider the position of the land and assets in case a transfer was requested by the school or partnership. Should this be taken further then a further approval process would be brought before Members to consider given the value of the assets concerned

2.0 MAIN ISSUES

The following outlines the current position for each Learning Base.

2.1 Fenland

2.1.1 A meeting took place in November with Andrew Campbell (Executive Head of Brooke Weston Academy Trust) and Clare Claxton (Head at Thomas Clarkson Academy) to discuss the future of the Fenland Learning Base in Wisbech. As previously thought, the Fenland BAIP partnership wishes to see continuing provision with Thomas Clarkson as the majority stakeholder/user. However the Brooke Weston Trust does not wish to see the liability of the building and running of the establishment pass to them alone. This was offered as an option earlier in the year. They would instead like the Local Authority to explore how another organisation might be sought to run and manage the Fenland Learning Base as an Alternative Education Academy. The effect of this would be to create an autonomous organisation that would work in partnership with the BAIP but as a standalone Academy in its own right. The funding for this provision would come in two parts, firstly an amount for each pupil directly from the Education Funding Agency and secondly from the 'commissioned top up' paid for by the BAIP using devolved funds.

2.1.2 The Fenland BAIP confirmed their desire to seek a sponsor for the Learning base to convert to become an academy at a meeting in December and has agreed to write a specification which will meet their needs. The Local Authority

has contacted the Regional Schools Commissioners Office to seek a potential sponsoring body that might be willing to take on the Fenland Learning Base. Clare Claxton is would be the named contact at Thomas Clarkson and Tom Jefford would represent the Local Authority. In regard to decision making it is a matter for the Management Committee of the County School to decide if Academy status is to be sought. In practical terms the Fenland BAIP is acting in this role already for the provision. Members are unable to actively prevent this option being pursued although of course they are able to make representations to the schools or express any objections that they might have through this committee.

2.2 Cambridge

2.2.1 In Cambridge, the Learning Base serves more than one partnership; Cambridge City and the combined South and East Cambridgeshire BAIP. Cambridge City is by far the majority user of the provision. A combined Transitions Board, chaired by Martin Campbell from North Cambridge Academy has been meeting since the summer to plan the future for the Learning Base at Ascham Road in Cambridge. A specification has been drawn up which is a statement of commissioning intentions by the Heads. The process has allowed the Heads to be clear about what provision they wish to invest in as well as to encourage collaborative working between them.

2.2.2 As with Fenland, the next step will be to send the specification to the Regional Schools Commissioners Office to seek a potential sponsoring body who would like to take over the running of the Learning Base. This process is in train. It is hoped that a clear direction can be achieved with an aim of seeking a transfer to a new body for September 2015. Members may again wish to express their views on the process being set out but are unable to formally prevent this course of action.

2.3 Quality Assurance Arrangements

Members have previously expressed interest in the role of the Local Authority in the quality assurance of alternative provision under the devolved model. A new quality assurance policy has been developed and agreed with schools, having been revised in consultation with a development group that included school inclusion leads. The Executive Head of the County School retires at the end of December and new County Manager for Alternative Provision has been appointed with a clear brief to lead the quality assurance process. The full policy is attached by way of an appendix. The policy will ensure that the County Council has robust arrangements in place to assure that a sufficient level of provision is provided to pupils who are accessing alternative provision commissioned or provided directly by the BAIPs.

3.0 ALIGNMENT WITH CORPORATE PRIORITIES

3.1 Developing the local economy for the benefit of all

3.1.1 There are no significant implications for this priority.

3.2 Helping people live healthy and independent lives

3.2.1 There are no significant implications for this priority.

3.3 Supporting and protecting vulnerable people

- 3.3.1 The Local Authority has a clear role in advocating for the vulnerable child and this can be expressed in the quality assurance arrangements.

4.0 SIGNIFICANT IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Resource Implications

- 4.1.1 There are resource implications to the changes being proposed as there would be changes to the way in which the funding arrangements take place. The budget for alternative provision within the High Needs Block would have the per pupil funding allocation taken directly from it by the Education Funding Agency at source. This funding would then be given directly to the Alternative Provision Academies at the rate of £8000 per full time place. Whilst the funding within the alternative education system remains the same the per pupil funding would not be available to schools directly. Schools would have less unrestricted funding available to them as the per pupil place funding is effectively locked into the provision.

4.2 Statutory, Risk and Legal Implications

- 4.2.1 Should the provision become either one or two Academies then there is a legal process to create the new legal form and a statutory consultation would need to take place to deal with the legal transfer and staffing issues.
- 4.2.2 Should a land and asset transfer become an option then there is a different legal process to undertake and a different decision making process for Members to agree given the requirements to achieve best value for the assets of the County.

4.3 Equality and Diversity Implications

- 4.3.1 There are no significant implications within this category

4.4 Engagement and Consultation Implications

- 4.4.1 There are no significant implications within this category

4.5 Public Health Implications

- 4.5.1 There are no significant implications within this category

4.6 Localism and Local Member Involvement

- 4.6.1 There are no significant implications within this category

Source Documents	Location
Quality assurance policy 2014 Alternative Provision, statutory guidance for local authorities January 2013	