

AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

26 September 2014

**THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE LOCAL AUTHORITY IN IMPROVING
EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES**

Report of Associate Director – Education

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 This report provides an update on:
- the changing role of the local authority, including its relationship with schools, within an increasingly autonomous education and training system;
 - progress made by the Education Leadership Board in developing an Education and Skills strategy for the city.

2. Background and Context

- 2.1 Like all local authorities in England, the City Council has the strategic lead for the education of children and young people in Sunderland. This includes a legal duty to ensure that every child fulfils his or her educational potential.
- 2.2 In addition, a key element of the Council's community leadership role is to ensure that everyone who lives, learns or works in the city has access to the best possible provision and achieves the best possible outcomes. This is reflected in the current Corporate Plan, which states that the Council's purpose is to "ensure Sunderland is a place where people can fulfil their ambitions and potential".
- 2.3 The 1996 Education Act places a duty on all local authorities "to promote high standards and fulfilment of potential" for everyone up to the age of 20 (25 for those with special needs). This is the statutory basis for Ofsted inspections of local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement. However, in order to fully discharge this duty, the Council's role extends beyond schools to the wider education and training system.
- 2.4 Further statutory duties relate specifically to the provision of services for vulnerable children and children with special educational needs (SEN). The Council also continues to be responsible for ensuring that there are sufficient good quality school places available and that there is fair access to these places.
- 2.5 Over the past 25 years there has been a gradual shift of power and responsibility from local authorities to schools. The policy of the current

government is to further “increase freedom and autonomy for all schools, removing unnecessary duties and burdens, and allowing all schools to choose for themselves how best to develop”. The ambition is to enable every school that wishes to enjoy greater freedom to achieve Academy status, and the direction of travel is “towards schools as autonomous institutions collaborating with each other on terms set by teachers, not bureaucrats”.

2.6 Academies are publicly funded independent schools. They do not have to follow the national curriculum and can set their own term times, but they are still required to follow the same rules on admissions, special educational needs and exclusions as other state schools. Academies receive their funding direct from the government, and they are run by an academy trust which employs the staff. A Free School has exactly the same legal status as an academy but can be set up by a range of different types of organisation.

2.7 Of the 115 publicly funded schools in Sunderland, the current breakdown of the different types of school is as follows:

	Community	Voluntary Aided	Voluntary Controlled	Academy	Free School	Totals
Nursery	9					9
Primary	48	15	1	18	1	83
Secondary	4	1		12	1	18
Special	3			4		7
Totals	64	16	1	34	2	117

NOTE: As Grindon Hall Christian School and Academy 360 have both primary and secondary classes, they have been counted twice.

2.8 Despite the significant changes in the educational landscape, many of the relationships and expectations between the Council and schools are historically based and do not always reflect their increased autonomy. There is still a tendency amongst some officers and members to be overly paternalistic towards schools, and some schools are still heavily dependent on support from the local authority.

3. The role of the local authority

3.1 Over the past few months, work has been undertaken to redefine the role of the Council to reflect both its Community Leadership role and its remaining statutory duties. The following key elements have been identified:

- Principled leader**
 Strong system leadership with a clear moral purpose. Bringing together key partners to determine a vision and strategy for the City, and then holding them to account for their contribution to the achievement of the City’s priorities. This encompasses all schools and learning providers, regardless of their status and governance arrangements.
- Champion and advocate**
 Acting as the champion of and advocate for all children, young people and families – especially the most vulnerable and those with special

needs. Ensuring that everyone, regardless of where they live in the City and their personal circumstances, is benefitting from high quality provision that meets their needs and enables them to achieve their potential.

- **Partnership enabler**

Facilitating and brokering effective partnerships for the benefit of children, young people, families and employers. Creating the conditions whereby partners can work together in a way that is mutually beneficial. This includes school-to-school support, cross-sector arrangements, education-business links and an integrated approach to supporting the most vulnerable.

- **Broker for high quality services**

Ensuring schools have access to high quality, affordable services that enable them to meet their obligations and improve the quality of their provision. This might involve developing strategic relationships with service providers, supporting groups of schools to commission services and acting as the “expert broker” when schools require specialist support.

- **Intelligence hub**

The capacity to collect, collate and analyse hard data and soft intelligence in order to maintain an overview of performance, detect emerging trends and pick up early warnings, and to inform the way in which the Council acts. This includes maintaining an overview of school governance so that the Council can intervene when concerns arise.

- **Planning authority**

Ensuring there are sufficient good quality school places and that there is fair access to them. Ensuring provision is being planned to meet the skill needs of the local and regional economy.

3.2 In order to provide leadership in this way, the Council will have to take full advantage of its democratic mandate and not solely rely on statutory powers. The issues that need to be addressed include:

- Our relationship with schools, the College, the University and other learning providers in order to discharge the Council’s role;
- Our strategic relationships with DfE, Ofsted, the diocese, academy trusts and governing bodies to ensure we are all working together effectively (given that they have powers of intervention that we no longer have);
- The internal systems and structures that need to be in place discharge these functions in a way that is effective, affordable and sustainable;
- Mechanisms for enabling Members to help strengthen the local accountability of schools and to share local intelligence;
- The potential conflicts of interests and divided loyalties that can arise when Members are also school governors, which is particularly an issue in academies where the governors are also trustees and company directors;
- The appropriateness of continuing to act as co-sponsors of the three original sponsored academies (Academy 360, Castle View, Red House), although Red House has already transferred to Northern Education Trust.

3.3 This redefined role and the associated issues were discussed by the Joint Leadership Team on 4th September 2014 and will form the basis of a policy statement that will be submitted for Cabinet approval later in the year.

4. The Education and Skills Strategy

4.1 An Education Leadership Board was established in 2012, under the chairmanship of local businessman John Mowbray, to develop an Education and Skills Strategy for the city to sit alongside the Economic Masterplan and the Health and Wellbeing Strategy. The Board constitutes representatives from early years settings, schools, Sunderland College, the University of Sunderland, the Sunderland Learning Provider Network, local employers and other interested parties. It currently meets on a monthly basis, with the most recent sessions being run as workshops rather than as formal board meetings. The frequency and style of meeting is likely to change once the strategy has been completed.

4.2 Following much debate, a strong consensus has eventually emerged on the strategic priorities for Sunderland and a draft strategy is currently being finalised, based on the three key themes of:

- **Ready for school**

Providing all children with the experiences and environments that support their physical, social, emotional, language, literacy and cognitive development – and ensuring that they reach school age ready to benefit from the opportunities provided.

- **Ready for work**

Ensuring that all children, young people and adults benefit from high quality learning that enables them to acquire the skills, personal qualities and qualifications they need to progress into sustainable employment within a rapidly changing economy.

- **Ready for life**

Preparing children, young people and adults to fill a variety of roles – as workers, parents, citizens and consumers – and empowering them to take full advantage of all the opportunities life presents and to be adaptable and resilient in the face of life's challenges and crises.

4.3 A final draft of the strategy was presented to the Education Leadership Board on 15th September 2014 and work is now underway to develop a delivery plan. A launch date has not yet been agreed, but we expect the strategy to be published in November 2014. We will then be inviting all the key players in the city's education and training system, including schools and employers, to adopt the strategy and to identify the specific contributions that they will make to achieving improved outcomes.

5. Recommendation

The Committee is recommended to note the report.