

Children and Young People Programme Board – report from Cllr David Simmonds (Chairman)

National Children and Adults Service Conference

1. On 20 October members of the Children and Young People Programme Board, and more than 50 other lead members for Children's Services from around the country, met with the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Michael Gove MP at the National Children and Adults Service Conference. It was a chance for lead members to ask questions and hear directly from the Secretary of State on the key issues they are facing in their areas including funding, pupil place planning and schools building projects.
2. I chaired a joint plenary at the conference with Children's Ministers Sarah Teather MP and Tim Loughton MP. Both Ministers were supportive of local authorities and acknowledged the hard work that local authorities engaged in to tackle the difficulties they are currently facing. However, they also argued that local government must also step up to the plate and make "the very best decisions" for children. Tim Loughton MP concluded his introduction with a call to streamline and speed up adoption processes and the members present gave a strong commitment to improving performance on adoption. They discussed the need for sharing best practice, safeguarding and the Munro Review and their commitment to a positive image of young people as well as taking questions from the floor.
3. I took part in a fringe session looking at the progress on implementing sector-led improvement, including the common issues for adults and children's services. The session discussed the need to ensure that new arrangements deliver robust challenge and improve adults and children's services for local people. Later that same day there was a policy workshop dedicated to improvement in children's services with the members of the Children's Improvement Board, a partnership group set up to steer sector led improvement. I highlighted the importance of involving the whole council in sector-led improvement and the need for councillors to drive this work from the top if self-regulation is going to be successful. Liz Railton, interim-Director of the Children's Improvement Board updated attendees on the work undertaken so far, including the work of 'Early Adopters' in London and East Midlands were arranging peer challenges between councils in these regions. It is proposed that all regions will receive devolved funding at regional level to support improvement activity locally.

Funding and improvement of academies

4. Earlier this month I wrote to Lord Hill CBE proposing that in areas where the majority of secondary schools have become academies, responsibility for the funding and improvement of academies should revert from the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA) back to the council. This would allow decisions on funding, improvement and intervention for all schools to be taken locally, creating a fair and transparent process where all schools can see how their funding allocation is worked out.
5. I argued that with 29 local authorities already having more than half of their secondary schools as academies, and 575 more academy conversions in the pipeline, there was a risk that the academies programme would result in a significant transfer of responsibilities from local councils to a national government agency, which seems hard to reconcile with the Government's commitment to localism. Allowing these functions to revert to councils in areas where they are no longer the majority provider of secondary schools would allow them to fulfil the more strategic role proposed for them in the School's White Paper as "champions of educational excellence" for all local schools.

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